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THE HIDDEN

Nilton Nixon Norberto Luisa Moniz da Costa

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Undang-undang Nomor 28 Tahun 2014
tentang Hak Cipta

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The Hidden

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Dedicated to my beloved poets, Apa-Ama, who write beautiful verses on my living pages

Norberto da Costa and Luisa Moniz

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PROLOGUE

The Lia-na'in arose amidst the throng, brandishing a blood-drenched sword in his right hand. The blood that stained the blade was that of a bird, recently killed as part of the ritual. Aged and wise, he scanned the surroundings, traversing the labyrinthine crowd, his gaze penetrating the depths of each person's eyes. Despite his actions, he remained silent. Eventually, he ascended the largest rock in the camp, taking his stance and peering down at the multitude.

As the sun descended, its fading light was usurped by encroaching darkness that enveloped the camp. An eerie stillness befell the crowd, with not a single word escaping their lips. They beheld the elder perched upon the colossal stone, anticipation evident in their collective gaze. However, these expectations held little significance for the young children, who stood alongside the elders, their minds free from the burden of waiting or the need to articulate their thoughts. Their presence was effortless, untouched by the weight of past or future. It was only the elders, privy to the secrets of the camp, who bore an

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undercurrent of anxiety and fear. Each elder exhibited a palpable fright, clutching the children tightly, their guardianship an unspoken vow of protection.

The elder then extended the sword towards the east, uttering an arcane incantation unfamiliar to the young ones. Momentarily closing his eyes, he opened them again to unveil a serene smile bestowed upon the onlooking crowd. His resonant voice reverberated through the air as he proclaimed, "Before the sun emerges in the eastern sky once more, the next Lia-na'in shall be born, destined to reclaim the treasure from the East Mountain." The exultant response from the throng resounded with echoing jubilation. Yet, among the jubilation, a solitary old man situated at the rear of the assembly merely smiled and nodded in agreement. Taking hold of a young boy's hand, he slowly retraced his steps, whispering in a deliberate cadence, "There lies nothing there!"

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CONTENTS

Prologue..... v
Table of Contents..... viii

Part I..... 1
Part II..... 25
Part III..... 55
Part IV..... 69
Part V..... 88
Epilogue..... 94

About the Author..... 97

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PART I

From a distance, he heard his name being called repeatedly. "Makrus, Makrus" the voice was already familiar to him, as it was an elderly voice that he had grown accustomed to. As the sun began to set, the boy arrived at an old cottage with his flock of sheep, whereupon he saw his grandfather patiently awaiting his arrival for hours on end. Swiftly, he guided his herd towards their sheepfold, whilst positioning himself at the entrance to count them one by one, assuring that none were left behind. "And finally, 70!" the boy exclaimed, as he meticulously placed some planks across the entrance to ensure that none of them escaped. He knew that it would be a challenging task to search for a lost sheep at night, but he also knew that there was no safer place for them to sleep than this. In reality, the boy and his herd shared an unbreakable bond, where he regarded them not as mere animals, but as his dear friends.

Verily, his true name was Markus, not Makrus, as his grandfather was wont to misspell it. However, he could tolerate it because his grandfather was getting

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older. For two years now, he had lived exclusively with his grandfather following the demise of his grandmother. The grandfather had commanded that she be interred close to their dwelling, a sagacious decision that allowed them to light candles and offer prayers for her soul every night.

The boy would diligently pray the rosary every night with his grandfather at his grandmother's resting place. Once he had safely guided the sheep into their fold, he would reverently take the candles and follow his grandfather to light them and pay homage through prayers. His grandfather had instilled in him that through prayer, souls could be redeemed, and he held dear to his heart his grandfather's wise words: "Prayer is what gives life to the soul! As long as we pray, the soul keeps living among us."

A decade had elapsed since his parents had entrusted him to his grandparents' care at the tender age of eight. Despite the passage of time, he still retained a vivid recollection of the unexpected farewell that had transpired. Although he had initially assumed that his parents would return to retrieve him soon, such was not the case. Several months had passed, and his grandfather's receipt of a letter had left him in tears, although the boy was yet incapable of understanding its contents. As he matured, he gradually grasped the significance of lighting candles before his parents' image, placed beside

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the image of the Virgin Mary on a nearby table. The same thing happened two years later when his grandmother passed away, and he held a poignant memory of his grandfather's words, "The Lady in the image knows the way back home."

After the boy had grown up, he decided to shepherd alone, without the company of his grandfather. He could still recollect every thing of his grandfather's teachings during their decade-long companionship, from predicting the weather to identifying verdant pastures. He would lead his flock to the river every noon, find the best place to take rest, and above all, learn to communicate with his sheep. Initially he was doubtful of the existence of their own language, but then, he eventually came to agree with his grandfather that they could understand each other. "If I can understand them, they can understand me as well. That's the language!" the boy affirmed to himself, all the while slowly nodding his head and opening his eyes in realization.

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Prior to the break of dawn, the boy was already awake. The darkness of the early morning enveloped the surroundings, accompanied by a chill that was customary for that time of day. "This is the ideal hour for individuals to wrap themselves in their cloaks and slumber. But not for the shepherds! Each person has their own beginning and end," the boy ruminated as he got up.

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Initially, he knelt down before a table which bore three images—one of his parents, another of his grandmother, and a striking image at the center of a beautiful Lady crowned with a phrase inscribed below that read "Immaculate Heart of Mary"—was a sacred and revered practice for the boy. Upon igniting the candle with utmost care, he would begin to offer his prayers with deep reverence and devotion. This ritual represented his unwavering faith and devotion to his family, his faith, and his heritage, which had endured through the years, and which he held dear in his heart.

The boy treaded cautiously, taking each step with utmost care, for he did not want to disturb his grandfather, who was still fast asleep. With his eyes closed, he uttered silent prayers, knowing that the Lady could hear him. He firmly believed that she resided within his heart, and as such, could hear his every thought, even if he did not voice them aloud.

As soon as the boy finished his prayers, he gently blew out the candle and proceeded to touch each of the three images before kissing the hand that he had used to do so. At the image of his grandmother, he always lingered a few seconds longer, his heart pounding rapidly and his eyes welling up with tears. Despite the overwhelming emotions he felt, he managed to control his breathing and refrain from shedding a tear. He was well aware that he had to remain strong. "Perhaps people leave us so that we may recognize their value in our lives," he mused to himself.

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The boy rose to his feet and made his way to his grandfather's bedside. He carefully adjusted the blanket to ensure that his grandfather was well covered, before turning his attention to his crook and small bag, both of which lay in the corner of the room. The bag contained a lighter, which he used to ignite firewood when baking tubers, a flute to entertain himself and his friends, and a book. Although he had already finished reading the book, he treasured it dearly, as it was a gift from his mother before she and his father departed. He could still remember the moment vividly, and as such, he always carried it with him in his bag wherever he went.

The book was titled "The Hidden," and contained a myriad of verses that the boy had come to know as poems. His grandfather had once explained to him that these were words that could help one to see the world in a wildflower. "And most importantly, it hides treasures within," his grandfather had said. The boy was familiar with this idea, as the very title of the book seemed to suggest it. However, despite rereading the book countless times over the years, he had never discovered any gold or pearls hidden among its pages. Nevertheless, he continued to read it for the sheer beauty of the lines that had the power to move his heart. For him, the beauty itself was the true treasure that lay within those pages.

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The boy slung his bag over his shoulder, picked up his crook, and made his way towards the sheepfold to greet his friends. As soon as he approached the entrance and began removing the planks, he noticed that the sheep had already sensed his arrival. "Their hearing is better than my grandfather's," the boy thought to himself, as each of the sheep filed out of the fold, baaing in greeting. The boy couldn't help but be impressed by their politeness and manners. This was also a clever strategy, as it made it easier for the boy to count them in the still-dark morning. He simply needed to listen for their individual greetings and count as they came out. "Baa," he heard one sheep say, "and 70!" he said slowly, relieved that none were missing.

As the boy and his herd made their way across the river, the sky was already awash with the warm hues of twilight. The boy urged the sheep to pick up the pace so that they could reach the camp in time to witness the sunrise. Upon arriving, he made his way to a large rock and climbed up to sit and watch the sun's ascent. "It's not just me watching the sun rise, it's also the other way around—the sun is climbing to watch me," he thought to himself. Suddenly, all of the sheep began to baa in unison, perhaps in response to the sun's greeting. "I know they can hear better than humans, not just better than my grandfather," he mused. And so, he decided to add his own greeting to the mix. "Good morning, Sun," he said with a smile.

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As the day broke, the other shepherds began to make their way towards the camp, their sheep bleating in greeting from afar. Despite being the youngest among them, the boy was always the first to arrive at the camp, a habit he had formed during the time when he still shepherded with his grandfather. He continued to keep this schedule even after his grandfather was no longer with him, remembering his grandfather's words when he had asked why they always arrived first. "Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old," his grandfather had said, referring to their appreciation for the beautiful sunrise that gave meaning to their lives as shepherds.

Once all the shepherds and their respective herds had arrived, the boy, as the youngest, took it upon himself to greet them all first, a lesson his grandfather had taught him and one that he had never forgotten. They spent the entire morning in the vast camp, which was named Esperanza, meaning hope. No one knew who had named it, but it was true that during the long, dry season, all the other camps would dry up, leaving Esperanza the only one that remained green. This was due to the camp's proximity to the river, which never dried up, even during the driest of seasons. "We should name the river Esperanza, not the camp, because without water, there would be no green pastures," the boy exclaimed. Nevertheless, he knew that not everything needed a

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name. "The river is still considered 'hope', even if it isn't called Esperanza. It's just a question of titles," he sighed.

The boy and his herd spent the entire morning at Esperanza, with the boy taking the time to reread his book of poems. As he came across verses that moved him, he would stand up on the rock and shout them out loud for all the other shepherds - and sheep - to hear. He didn't care if they were moved as well or not, as he believed that expressing himself was more important than impressing others. His grandfather had once told him, "Do not allow your heart to take pleasure in the praises of people, nor be saddened by their condemnation." This advice had stuck with him over the years, and he continued to do what delighted him and his friends, as long as they never complained. In fact, his sheep always baaed soon after he declaimed the verses. "Only your friends know your value," the boy thought while sitting down, and then got back into his reading.

Sometimes as he read the verses, he was overtaken by numerous imaginations and dreams. He often pictured his ideal woman, who would be just like his grandmother - a woman who knew the life of a shepherd. She would boil water for him and his grandfather to bathe in during the rainy season, always smiling to alleviate their tiredness. Most importantly, she would spend her nights sitting and listening to the stories of the shepherds, patiently counting each one. Sometimes it took a couple

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of hours every night to count the stories of how the shepherds spent their day throughout the whole day." The listener might be patient, and my grandmother was truly a patient woman," he thought to himself.

In the noon, he led his herd into the jungle, playing his flute melodiously as they followed. He discovered that his sheep could even follow the specific notes of the flute, as his grandfather had taught him the notes that could direct the sheep to follow him. "The sheep can even hear what the flute says to them. They know its language!" he marveled.

The camp was bathed in bright sunlight, with no trees to provide shade, only pastures and Solidagos. However, in the jungle, there were plenty of trees that could shield them from the sun's rays. Although there were no grasses or Solidagos to be found there, the sheep were already well-fed and content. They simply needed to rest in the shade of the trees. Meanwhile, it was time for the boy to find something to eat. He knew exactly where to go to find the tubers, as he had the entire jungle mapped out in his head. He didn't need a physical map to find his way or his food. The boy had never told anyone about the hole his grandfather had dug to save tubers for the dry season. Although it wasn't a problem for the sheep, who could easily access the nearby river for water, it was a different story for the boy, who had to venture out into the jungle to find food. He took out two tubers and baked them,

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while the sheep slept nearby. After eating, he fell asleep beneath the shade of an old oak tree.

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Suddenly, the boy was jolted awake by an inexplicable energy. His breathing became rapid, and his heart began to beat uncontrollably. He looked around, wide-eyed and afraid, unknowingly scaring his sheep—friends. The sheep began to bleat and stir at the sight of him. The boy knew something was wrong and that he needed to return home immediately.

The boy quickly gathered his crook, small bag, and flute, and signaled for the sheep to follow him. Though his notes were not as melodious as before, the sheep followed him obediently. The boy was so anxious that he could not concentrate, and he ran out of the jungle as quickly as possible, pushing the herd to keep pace. By the time they reached the camp, the sun had already begun to set. The boy decided to leave the sheep there, assuring them that he would return to fetch them later. He hung his bag at the edge of a large rock and leaned his crook next to it. "My crook and bag are here with you," he announced to them, knowing that these things would give them some sense of hope. They all began to bleat, and the boy suddenly felt a little calmer. He dismounted and rushed down into the valley.

It was already afternoon when he crossed the river, which he referred to as 'hope'. For the first time, he

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arrived home without his sheep, crook, and bag, and in an unusual schedule. When he arrived, he couldn't see his grandfather outside the house. "Maybe he's inside," he mused to himself. Running through the back door, he suddenly slowed down upon hearing his grandfather's voice in conversation with someone in front of the house. The stranger's voice was unfamiliar to him. "Who is that?" he asked himself. The boy had been told that when he went shepherding, only his grandfather's old friend, who came often to the house, would accompany him.They used to share endless stories, laughter, and sometimes tears for the forgotten years that had passed.

"But he's not him," the boy doubted as he listened in on the conversation through a hole in the wall, due to its age. Although he could not see the stranger's face, he could tell that he was an older man, likely his grandfather's age. He wore an old white shirt, a tais enroled, and many mutisalahs and a belak around his neck. The boy could tell that the man was not from a different place, but he was still puzzled as to why he couldn't recognize him. "I know everyone here because everyone goes shepherding all the time, except for the old ones like my grandfather. Even the kids follow the elders to learn from them. And when the time comes, the kids grow up and become the shepherds, just like me," he thought to himself.

The conversation lasted so long that he began to grow weary of their slow and low voices. He sat down

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and rested his head against the wall, observing a colony of ants making their way up the surface. In a moment of whimsy, he wondered if they were shepherds and, if so, how small their sheep would be. But suddenly, a wave of nostalgia washed over him, causing him to panic once again. He thought of his friends and whether or not they were waiting for him, and of the possible dangers that could be lurking in the dark. Would there be snakes or robbers? Would dark spirits come to devour his friends? His grandfather's tales of these dark spirits had always frightened him the most. He could not sit still any longer, his knees growing weak and his hands trembling with cold sweat. His heart raced faster than ever before. Then, a voice called out his name from afar, "Markus, come here!"

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The boy hesitated for a moment, looking eagerly towards the front door. "I know it's not my grandfather," he thought, shocked. "It must be the stranger, for my grandfather has never spelled my name correctly." He assumed that perhaps his grandfather had simply told the stranger his name, and that the stranger knew that the proper name was Markus, not Makrus. "But how does he know that I am here?" the boy wondered anxiously. He walked slowly towards the front door, and heard his name called again, "Markus, don't be afraid!" The atmosphere grew more tense and eerie with each passing moment. The second call made him even more curious

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about the stranger, but at the same time more anxious. "Who is this stranger who knows my feelings?" the boy wondered, "No, I will not show him my flaws! No, I'm not afraid!" He tried to reassure himself, taking a deep breath and extending his right hand to open the door. He pushed the door open forcefully, trying to conceal his fear. He looked confident, but his heart knew the truth.

The boy approached them with a harsh demeanor. Only his grandfather looked at him, while the stranger did not turn his back. He tried to read the situation by looking at his grandfather's face, to see if he was smiling or angry. But as usual, his grandfather's face was stoic, revealing no emotions. The boy always believed in what his heart told him, and at that moment, his heart was not calm, he knew that something was very wrong about that stranger.

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The boy stepped closer to the stranger, finally seeing his face and meeting his gaze. A moment of awkward silence fell between them, their eyes seeming to recognize each other even though their hearts had never met before. The old man's face was weathered, with a long beard that almost covered his lips and hair that was shiny white. Deep wrinkles etched his forehead, giving him an air of wisdom and experience.

"Good afternoon," the boy greeted, feeling a sense of calm wash over him. "I was inside the house, so I could not hear you."

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"This man is different," he told his heart firmly. The stranger smiled warmly, but his words caught the boy off guard. "I know you were trying to listen to our conversation. But don't ever call me 'different'! We are all the same, created by Uru-watu."

The mention of the name 'Uru-watu' caught the boy's attention, reminding him of the powerful Being who created all things, God. His grandfather had often spoken of Uru-watu and the Lady, to whom the boy was most devoted. He felt a sense of peace settle over him, reassured by the mention of God.

"Anyone who talks about good things is most likely to be a good person," he recalled his grandfather saying. And he felt sure that this old man was indeed a good person.

The boy calmly moved a nearby stone and sat on it. "So..." He raised his eyebrows, trying to create a more friendly atmosphere, while leaving gaps for the old man to fill up. The boy tried to ask the reason why the old man had called, but he remained silent and clueless. The old man stared firmly into the boy's eyes without any words coming out of his mouth. It was awkward for the boy, but he tried so hard not to show his feelings and stay clueless. He tried to talk to his grandfather to avoid eye contact and hide his interest, but he could sense the awkwardness clearly.

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The old man's sudden action caught the boy and his grandfather off guard. They had been in the middle of a conversation, but now, their attention was solely focused on the two green leaves in the old man's hands. The leaves were fresh and vibrant, and the way the old man examined them with such intensity made it seem like they held some sort of mystical power. The air around them felt charged with an unexplainable energy, and the boy couldn't help but feel a sense of deja vu.

As he breathed rapidly and his heart began to race, the memories of the jungle flooded his mind. He saw himself standing on the familiar rock, looking out at a sea of strangers. He remembered the strange cloth he wore, adorned with bright accessories he didn't recognize. Someone whispered in his ear, "you are the next." The words echoed in his mind, and he couldn't shake the feeling of foreboding that came with them.

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It was like the moment he had been awakened from a deep slumber all over again. His sheep were baaing, his crook and bag were by his side, and he clutched his only book and flute. He saw himself slowly opening his eyes, standing on the rock, looking out at the crowd of people. And then, just like before, someone whispered in his ear, "you are the next." He repeated the words to himself gently, trying to make sense of their meaning.

And suddenly, the boy was brought back to the present moment. The old man smiled and looked at his

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grandfather slightly, then at the boy and said, "It is you!" by pointing his finger to the boy's chest. The boy was so confused, but the stranger stood up and wanted to dismiss the conversation. "I will come tomorrow morning when the sun starts to rise," the old man said to the boy's grandfather, "The boy and I will go as the darkness still covers the earth." The boy looked so confused, yet his grandfather was totally agreeable to whatever happened at that moment. "He is actually a respected person!" the boy thought, "but what exactly did they discuss? Where should the stranger and I go in the morning? And again, who is he?" And the old man left their house, walking slowly towards the path to the jungle, where in fact the boy had never been.

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As the old man vanished, dusk was coming, and the boy surprisingly remembered his friends whom he had left at the camp. He put aside the questions and harshly informed his grandfather that the sheep were still in the camp and that he had to go right at that moment to fetch them immediately. He ran quickly towards the direction of the camp but unfortunately forgot to bring the torch with him. He was so uneasy when he arrived in the valley to cross the river because the night had already covered the earth with its darkness. He went a little bit slowly to avoid any accident on the way. Fortunately, due to his ability to recall the way, he was able to slowly recognize the path. And he climbed the mountain, and from afar,

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he could hear the flock baaing. Actually, they could sense his presence even from afar. Their spirits had already matched each other since a long time as they had become friends. They needed each other just as the thirsty and water. "Not only the thirsty seek the water, but the water as well seeks the thirsty," the boy thought, "Indeed, in friendship, there is no 'me' and 'them,' just 'us.' We need each other."

As he heard the sheep baaing, he became calm. It was totally dark, but he could sense the presence of his sheep releasing their fear and joy at the same time. However, he couldn't be sure if all the sheep were there or if some had gone missing. He stopped for a while and began to take slow breaths, calming himself down. The big rock in the camp was clearer than other things, even though the darkness of night prevented the light. He then climbed the big rock and sat on it. The wind was blowing gently.

The tranquility of the atmosphere was so calming that the boy felt compelled to sit down and take in his surroundings. He remained silent, listening intently to the sound of the wind. His grandfather had once told him that everything in the world had its own language and knows how to speak, but not everyone is willing to listen. The boy believed in his grandfather's words but had never thought that everything had a language of its own. He had only believed that apart from humans, sheep had their language.

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The boy closed his eyes and whispered, "Oh wind, if you speak, I am here to listen to you. Please console me with a word." He waited patiently, becoming more and more attentive to the sounds around him. After a few minutes, the boy opened his eyes, feeling disappointed that he had not heard anything from the wind. To his surprise, he saw that his friends were staring at him. The moon had started to rise from the east, and only half of the full moon was visible. The boy stood up, looking around to make sure everything was okay, especially his sheep.

Suddenly, all the sheep baaed at once. The boy was surprised, wondering what they wanted to say. He looked up and found out that there was already a full moon in the East, aligning with him. "Oh, they are greeting the moon," the boy assumed with wide eyes. "Good evening," the boy said in turn. The moon was slowly rising up, and everything became clearer than before. He took his crook and counted the sheep with it. The boy was delighted that none of his friends were lost. He sighed and realized what his grandfather had tried to tell him at the moment he asked his grandfather to permit him to shepherd alone. His grandfather had told him "Once you carry your own water, you'll learn the value of every drop." The boy said silently to himself, "Now I understand."

Then he dismounted the big rock. The boy hung his small bag and blew the flute to tell the sheep to follow

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him. The sheep followed him for the melodious notes. The bright moon helped him so much to lead his herd in the right path.

With slow paces, the boy finally arrived with his friends at home. Then he immediately directed his herd to their fold. After getting the sheep inside their fold, he solemnly took the candles and followed his grandfather towards the grave to kindle and pray the rosary. His grandfather was waiting for him.

That night, they prayed the rosary longer than before. It was like it was the last night of praying the rosary. "It seemed like it was my first time praying the rosary!" the boy could sense it. At some moment, the boy was about to fall asleep due to the tiredness of the day, but he had to handle it forcefully. Every night was a battle between Uru-watu and the demons, for his body told him to sleep, but his heart gently convinced him to keep praying. But God always won the battle because the one who prayed stood on God's side. His grandfather had told him not to abandon prayer, even if it seemed pointless. "I have to control myself so that I can be free from the demons' attraction," the boy muttered, "No man is free who cannot control himself."

The boy, due to his sleepiness, would sometimes deliberately arrange the candles in such a way that his fingers would get burnt. This helped him stay awake until the rosary ended. He held the rosary beads tightly in his

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right hand, counting them with utmost attention. He had to stay focused on his prayer so as not to miss a single Ave Maria.

The rosary that night ended with an unusual silence before the sign of the cross was made. The boy could sense his grandfather's restlessness as he closed his eyes and took deep breaths, as he did when faced with difficult decisions in the past, such as when the boy had asked to become a lone shepherd. At that time, the boy waited anxiously, hoping for an answer, fixed on his grandfather's closed eyes. Without saying a word, his grandfather closed his eyes and took a deep breath. After a while, he picked up the crook and handed it to him as a symbol of acceptance.

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And now, the boy was transported to that memory; he could feel the wind of curiosity gusting violently within his soul. "What will he tell me this time?" the boy thought deeply, "It's a difficult decision, but what decision?" The boy was still waiting for the answer and fixed his eyes on his closed-eyed grandfather. Outside, the wind grew stronger, and the night grew colder. The boy could sense it, though he wasn't sure if his grandfather felt the same. With his trembling hands, he shielded the candles' light from the gusts

"Screw it, let them go out! Let's go inside, it's too cold," his grandfather suddenly spoke up, getting up to head

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into the house. The boy respectfully extinguished the candles and made the sign of the cross before following his grandfather inside.

Once inside, The boy shut the door behind him and joined his grandfather in the kitchen. He noticed his grandfather lost in thought, so he took out a lighter, grabbed some sticks, and started burning them. The silence was unbroken, and the boy drew some lines on the ground, trying to ease the tension. Suddenly, his grandfather spoke with a shaky voice, "Follow your heart, but take your brain along. The journey is long, but you must persevere until the end." The boy stopped drawing and looked up at his grandfather, giving him his full attention. He wanted to speak up but remained silent, eager to hear more. "Tomorrow morning, the Lia-na'in will come to take you away," his grandfather continued. The boy's pupils dilated in excitement. "You will both go to a far-off land where the most beautiful flower in the world blooms and the river of hope flows." The boy pondered the words carefully, wondering what they meant. "Is it a riddle?" he thought. "The most beautiful flower I know is the Solidago, and the river of hope is already nearby. Why should I go so far away to find something that's already close?" He pondered the mystery deeply.

"I know that it may be difficult for you to venture far, but it is even more difficult for me to let you go, to

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go far!" His grandfather's eyes were brimming with tears as he uttered these words. The fire slowly began to die down, but the boy's heart was still burning with passion. He was at a loss for words, so he gazed longingly into his grandfather's eyes as tears streamed down his face. The boy was deeply moved, thinking, "I have never seen my hero cries before."

Then, he summoned the courage to speak his mind. "Where should I go, Papa?" he whispered, inching closer to his grandfather. "I don't know," his grandfather replied, looking intently into his eyes. He repeated, "I don't know, my son," and added, "but wherever you end up, please remember me!"

The boy was anxious and spoke out, "What do you mean? No, I will never forget you. How could I forget my hero? If I forget you, I will never be able to fly because you are my wings!" But his grandfather interrupted him, saying, "I know, I know, but we are led by the spirit, and sometimes we are led by the dark spirit which is opposed to the spirit of love. Thus, keep the Lady with you; she knows the way."

Then, they were enveloped in an uncomfortable silence. The boy was breathing deeply with anxiety, and he kept asking, "What will we do there? What about the flowers and the river?" His grandfather took a deep breath and replied, "I don't know." The boy, seething with anger, stood up and said, "How can you send me to a

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place that you don't even know?" He added, "I won't go then!"

His grandfather immediately stood up and fixed his gaze on the boy's eyes, without blinking. "Even I don't know, Uru-watu knows. And this is his plan for you," he said in a louder voice. "How do you know that it's his plan?" the boy shouted uncontrollably.

"I dreamt it, I dreamt that you were covered in the blood of sheep," his grandfather replied, and the air was filled with silence. "I dreamt the same thing when I was in the jungle. It frightened me terribly!" the boy spoke with a low voice as he walked closer to his grandfather. "But what does this dream mean? Is it a puzzle to be solved?" he asked.

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"The Lia-na'in knows. He dreamt the same thing, and so he came that afternoon to see you," his grandfather added. "He said to me that he wants to take you to a far-off land where you can find the answer. He said that 'you are the next', but I did not ask him to clarify what he meant. The boy kept staring at his grandfather for a while. "But I trust him. He is the chief of Lia-na'ins in our knua (sacred house), and so whatever he speaks, he speaks with the voice of Uru-watu," his grandfather reiterated.

He sighed and looked down at the floor, deep in thought. He couldn't put into words what he was feeling.

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His heart had never learned to feel this feeling before. His grandfather placed his right hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "You can do it. With Uru-watu's help, you can. Don't walk alone, or you will fall!"

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His grandfather masticated the betel leaves and distributed the liquid onto the boy's forehead while tenderly kissing it. He then proceeded to anoint the boy's chest and both wrists. Subsequently, employing his thumb, the grandfather traced cross signs on the boy's forehead, chest, and wrists. With these ritualistic gestures completed, the boy was ready to go on his journey.

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PART II

In the predawn obscurity, the larks' melodic symphony resonated. The boy abruptly roused, encountering his grandfather kneeling before the table adorned with the Immaculate Heart of Mary at its center. Two candles flickered, casting a soft glow. The grandfather, with closed eyes and his face was clueless as usual, engaged in prayer. "God alone knows," ruminated the boy, reflecting on the change in his grandfather's early rising habits since relinquishing the shepherd's role. Memories flooded back, evoking the boy's youthful aspirations to become like his grandfather as a shepherd.

Seated on the bamboo bed, the boy observed his grandfather's silent devotions, admiring the unwavering faith. "God must surely be proud of him," pondered the boy, rising to kneel behind his grandfather, joining in prayer. As he fervently prayed, his gaze shifted to three images adorning the table: his parents, his cherished grandmother, and the crowned Lady, a divine presence he believed accompanied him unfailingly, cognizant even of his friendships.

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Soon his grandfather got up and went off, the boy persisted in prayer, grappling with the challenges of the moment. Recalling his grandfather's counsel in the face of adversity, "When the storm gets harder, pray harder," he concluded his devotions. Extinguishing the candle, he tenderly touched each image, imprinting a kiss on his venerated hand. Lingering on his grandmother's image, he contemplated for a moment before departing.

Following his grandfather to the kitchen, the boy saw the glow of a burning fire. Drawing nearer, he observed his grandfather seated by the flames for warmth. Their mutual gaze held profound significance, just like the moment when the grandfather entrusted the boy to shepherd alone. Yet, this time felt deeper, a silent witness of separation, where eyes might not see each other for long time and heartthat would miss the beloved's heartbeat.

The boy settled into a seated position, inquiring, "When will he arrive?" His grandfather, with a composed demeanor, responded, "Patience, he shall appear before the dawn breaks." A surge of tears welled in the boy's eyes, emotions too potent to conceal. "Papa, I cannot bear to leave you alone," he cried, prompting an embrace where both were ensnared in tearful sorrow, gripped by the chill of the encroaching cold.

In an attempt to console, the grandfather assured, "It's okay! I will be alone, but not for a long time, because you will come back soon. Your return shall be

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swift." The boy, wordless, sought solace, laying upon his grandfather's chestas he did not want to get away from him. "Now, it's my turn to watch over your friends," his grandfather declared. The boy, defiant, exclaimed, "No more shepherding! You're old enough to traverse valleys." A wry smile adorned his grandfather's face as he reminded, "Do you still remember what I told you? Once a shepherd, forever a shepherd. Remember this, my son."

"I am still strong enough to walk further," his grandfather muttered. "I am a shepherd. I was born to be a shepherd! This is my mission! And you, now, you have to go wherever the place Uru-watu wants... and that's your mission," his grandfather uttered gently. "It is your mission," the grandfather repeated. "Go and find out whom Uru-watu wants you to become."

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"But I am a shepherd," the boy replied.

"Yes, you are. You are a shepherd, but you were not born to become a shepherd," his grandfather sighed. "You have to find out Uru-watu's will for you. And sometimes you have to go further to find out what is inside your heart," his grandfather added. "Even if the treasure box is here, it doesn't mean that the key is also here!"

The boy thought deeply about these words and guarded them inside his heart.

They eagerly noticed a light coming out of the forest as if someone was approaching their house. "It's time!"

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his grandfather muttered, and the boy looked at him eagerly without saying a word. Then he looked back at the light. "It must be the Lia-na'in," the boy already knew. He then looked at his crook and the small bag in the corner which was a little heavier now. Inside, he had a lighter, a flute, a book, a betel leaf, and an areca nut. He remembered what his grandfather had told him about the function of the betel leaf and areca nut: in the past, the Asu-wain (warrior) kept them inside their pocket so that they could be protected by the ancestors in war. "So, it is a war for me!" the boy thought. As he was about to turn back, he was attracted to see his rosary beads which he always used to pray with, laid on the table in front of the image of his late grandmother. His grandmother had given him that rosary bead and had taught him to pray with it. The boy approached the table, bowed down before the Lady, and took the rosary beads. He put the rosary beads into his full bag as well. "The most powerful force in the universe is faith!" the boy thought.

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With his bag securely on his back, the boy approached his grandfather who was standing in the door. The light in the distance grew brighter and brighter, and both of them fixed their eyes on the path it was coming through. As it drew near, they could see that the flame was slowly dying out until it was completely dark. The only sound was the footsteps of the light bringer on the dead leaves, which filled the silence of the darkness. Then a face

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appeared in the light that was cast on the kitchen wall. "Bondia," the Lia-na'in greeted them first. "Bondia," both the boy and his grandfather replied simultaneously. The old man entered the house in a single step, and the three of them stood together in the same spot.

Having meticulously arranged his compact bag, the boy exuded a resolve untainted by tears, embodying a heart infused with courage and preparedness. "We must reach the river before sunrise," the old man directed with unwavering eyes. The boy, acknowledging the command, nodded in understanding. Without a backward glance, he firstly ventured into the darkness before the Lia-na'in, bidding farewell to his cherished friends in their fold.

Inside the kitchen, the grandfather and the old man could hear the sheep's bleating emanating from their fold. "His friends," the grandfather remarked to the old man, who sighed in agreement. Taking a torch from the kitchen, the old man ignited it with the dwindling coals. "Guard my son," the grandfather entreated as the old man proceeded through the door. Observing the retreating flame in the distance, the grandfather reflected, "This sensation is different; perhaps my heart has not learned to feel in this way before." The flame gradually diminished, surrendering to the pervasive darkness.

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An hour enshrouded in darkness, guided by the flame

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as a compass and filled with a palpable silence, elapsed. Upon reaching the river, the impending sunrise bathed everything in clarity. Swiftly ascending the mountain, the boy outpaced the old man, his vision sharper even in dim light. The boy, reaching the summit, welcomed the camp and ascended the usual rock, savoring the beauty of the emerging sun. "Sun, we are getting up to greet each other. 'Bondia,'" he proclaimed.

Shortly thereafter, the old man joined the boy at the mountain's peak. Seated beside a large rock, they marveled at the rising sun. The boy, shouting in awe "How beautiful you are, Sun," echoed his words off the mountain walls, creating an unfinished symphony of "Sun, Sun, Sun." The old man, uplifted by the boy's voice, stood with wide-open eyes. "How did you achieve this?" he inquired eagerly. The boy, eyebrows furrowed in confusion, met the old man's gaze. "I've felt it before!" the old man declared, his spirit stirred as if yearning for conversation. The boy, offering a slight smile, replied, "It is the nature! My Papa taught."

The old man, intrigued, sought confirmation. "Have you experienced it?" The boy, descending from the rock, asserted, "Nature is my friend, I talk with her everyday." The old man, with a perplexed and distrustful expression, probed further. The boy, approaching closely, declared, "Uru-watu created me, nature sustains me; we are connected." The Lia-na'in chuckled, claiming superiority.

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"Little boy, I am *a Lia-na'in*!" The old man added more "I know nature better. We are one!" Undeterred, the boy insisted, "To be friends means to be one." The old man, irritated, asserted his supposed knowledge. Dismissing the boy's voice, he pressed forward. The boy was eager to discuss his belief that "Nature has its own language!" but the old man seemed uninterested in the conversation. Eventually, the boy gave up trying to convince him. He remembered an old joke his grandfather used to tell him: "Bees don't waste their time explaining to flies that honey is better than shit." The boy couldn't help but wonder if he was the bee or the fly. But he knew one thing for certain: "Nature is what makes me sweet like honey."

As they walked towards the edge of the camp and entered the jungle, the Lia-na'in suddenly stopped and looked back at the boy. "How long have you been here?" he asked. The boy was surprised by the question and eagerly replied, "How did you know that?" His eyes widened in curiosity. The old man chuckled and said, "The jungle speaks to me, my boy!" The boy followed the old man, feeling both confused and intrigued. "This old man is not arrogant at all, he really listens to what nature says," he thought to himself. As they continued walking, the old man said, "Little boy, your scent is still lingering here with your herds!" The boy confirmed, "Yes, we used to rest here." He then wondered if scent could be a way for nature to communicate with humans.

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After several hours of trekking through the dense forest, they finally arrived at a heavily wooded area filled with towering trees. The foliage grew so thick that it created an impenetrable wall, obscuring the view beyond. The boy had never ventured this deep into the jungle before, as there was never a need to do so during his years of shepherding. Even when he was with his grandfather in the past, they only walked around the edges of the jungle to collect the tubers that grew there. This was a new and exciting experience for the boy, as he felt a sense of adventure and wonder at the mysterious beauty of the jungle.

As they were about to enter the unknown jungle, the boy's mind was filled with questions. He wondered why his father had never taken him through this part of the jungle before. It appeared that this area was less traveled, or perhaps never traveled before. The boy's curiosity was piqued, and he couldn't help but wonder what secrets lay hidden within the unexplored jungle. As they approached the thick foliage, the Lia-na'in abruptly stopped, causing the boy to halt in his tracks as well. The boy could fell a sense of unease and mistrust towards the new acquaintance, despite not showing any emotion or saying a word. He looked around cautiously, trying to assess the situation. "Why does he stop? What is happening?" The boy asked himself relentlessly, his mind racing with questions.

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The old man let out a deep sigh and began to speak in a language the boy had never heard before. Although the boy could pick out a few words here and there, he struggled to understand the meaning of the old man's strange utterances. The boy was reminded of his grandfather, who would also speak in a similar manner during the corn harvest, a ritual known as SauBatar, a thanksgiving to the ancestors for a bountiful harvest.

"It's the language of the spirits," the boy remembered his grandfather telling him. "The spirits have their own language, and we must learn it if we want to communicate with them." However, the boy had not yet mastered this language, and he often found himself wondering how his descendants would talk to him after he died. "I hope I never forget my language even after I become a spirit," the boy thought to himself.

The Lia-na'in lifted the edge of his cloth, revealing a short sword tucked inside. The boy's eyes widened as he watched the sword glinting in the sunlight. He clutched his bag tightly, feeling anxious in the presence of the weapon. The old man drew the sword, and the boy could see the sharpness of the blade.

"Before we go, you must pray to Uru-watu," the old man said eagerly. "I have finished my prayer, and now it is your turn." With that, the old man began clearing the branches and foliage that blocked their path, and the boy

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quickly made the sign of the cross and prayed, his eyes closed tightly.

Once he finished, he followed the old man as they made their way into the unknown depths of the jungle, marveling at the beauty of the lush surroundings.

*

After several hours of trekking through the jungle, the boy began to notice that the dense foliage blocked most of the sunlight, leaving only a few rays to filter through the canopy. The eerie silence of the jungle made him feel slightly uneasy, as if there were no living beings around except for the towering trees themselves. He wondered if there were any spirit beings taking care of the forest, as his grandfather used to tell him stories of good and bad spirits that could reside within people and animals alike. The boy remembered how his sheep were always loyal to him, and he believed that this must be because the good spirit was within them. As he continued on his journey, he wondered if his friends possessed the same spirit within them or if they were influenced by the bad spirit. Despite his lack of knowledge on the subject, he felt certain that the good spirit was a force to be reckoned with.

As he walked silently behind the old man, the boy couldn't help but notice the absence of birdsong in the jungle. He wondered why there were no birds flying and

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singing within the dense foliage. "Big trees must be an advantage for the birds, but where are they?" he thought to himself, feeling confused. The sound of birds singing used to strengthen him when he was tired in the camp or while shepherding in the jungle. But since there were no songs, the boy slowly began to feel exhausted. "I wonder if I should have brought some water," he sighed, realizing the importance of staying hydrated in such a challenging journey.

The exhaustion was so overwhelming that it felt like the boy had been walking through the jungle for a year. To make matters worse, he could not distinguish the position of the sun to read the time. His fatigue had gotten the best of him, and he could no longer bear to continue walking. He stopped abruptly, collapsing onto a nearby rock with no regard for anything else. His lips were pale, and his face was devoid of any emotion, consumed by the deadly thirst that came with such a long journey. It was at that moment that the old man finally noticed the boy and decided to stop as well.

The boy's voice was strained as he gasped for air. "Is there any river nearby?" he asked desperately. "I am dying of thirst!" The old man's eyes filled with pity as he looked at the exhausted boy. "Come on, boy," he said gently. "The river is just a short walk away. Let's go." The old man turned and began to walk, pulling the boy along with him. Despite his fatigue and anger, the boy allowed

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the old man to lead him by the hand. As they walked, the boy wondered why the old man didn't seem to be thirsty like he was.

The steep path they were on felt like a never-ending uphill climb. Every step was a struggle, and the mountain seemed to get steeper and steeper. The boy could feel the old man's grip on his hand weakening, and he knew that they were both running out of energy. However, the old man's words about a river in the valley gave the boy a renewed sense of hope. He tightened his grip on his crook and pushed himself to keep climbing. At last, they reached the top of the mountain, and the boy rushed ahead, desperate to quench his thirst. The old man followed slowly, using the trees to steady himself as he descended. The boy's tongue felt like sandpaper, and he could barely wait for the river to come into view.

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After several minutes of relentless climbing, the boy finally reached the peak of the mountain. Eager to quench his thirst, he immediately climbed on top of a big rock. As he stood there, the sun's rays fell on him like a victorious warrior returning from battle. The fresh air around him was a welcome relief, and the sight of the dark jungle's edge filled him with a sense of peace. On the other side of the mountain, streams flowed endlessly, creating a breathtaking view of green and white. Completely forgetting his thirst, the boy let out a triumphant "Uhuuu!" as he took in the stunning scenery.

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The boy's heart swelled with joy as he sat down, and began to speak tenderly a verse to the beauty of nature, just as he used to do in camp. "I am thirsty for your beauty. And now I am no longer thirsty because you have filled me up!" he recited, feeling grateful for the stunning sight before him. Suddenly, the old man appeared behind him, listening to the boy's verse. After hearing it, the old man added another verse gently, "Oh, may your beauty become my water of life that sustains my life!" The boy looked back and smiled, feeling content. The old man climbed the rock and sat next to the boy, and they both gazed out at the valley of beautiful streams, green trees, grasses, and flying birds together as flocks. The wind blew gently, and they both recited their verses to form a poem for nature:

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The boy: "Oh nature, oh my mother, take care of me as your son."

The old man: "From dawn until the down of the sun, take care of me."

The boy: "For in you, my soul revives, and my heart finds its peace."

The old man: "By the stream and over the green pastures, I delight."

The boy: "Reveal your beauty so that I can still be alive."

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The old man: "Because you know me and take care of my life!"

The old man said, "Beautiful!" with gentleness, and the boy smiled, feeling happy. He stood up and asked, "Is the river down there?" The old man nodded his head up and down, and the boy shouted, "Uhuuu!" as he ran down fastly towards the river to quench his thirst. The old man smiled and stood up, following the boy towards the river.

*

Upon reaching the river, the old man discovered the boy lounging on the riverbank, devoid of clothes after a refreshing shower. A blissful expression adorned the boy's face. The old man, nearing the riverbank, cupped water in his hands, finding solace in its soothing touch. Originating from the mountaintop, the cascading river offered both freshness and tranquility. Trees and green pastures adorned the riverbanks, promising a crisp breeze carrying delicate droplets that caressed appreciative faces. The old man, undressing, joined the boy in the river, swimming alongside peaceful fishes. Emerging, he reclined beside the boy, basking in the gentle warmth of the sun's rays.

"Let me ask you something," the boy eagerly interjected. "How many times have you ventured through that dark jungle?" The old man's response was surprising,

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"Never, I have never traversed such a jungle before!" Bewilderment marked the boy's expression, questioning the basis for trusting the old man's guidance. Laughter from the old man accompanied his explanation, "Walk by faith, not by sight. We are nothing, boy; we are nothing! Only God can do everything."

"We do not follow each other; we follow God's light!" The old man rose to his feet, draped himself in his worn cloak, and continued to speak, "Remember, my boy, in times past, when you stood in the midst of darkness, seeking the light and following its path," he continued, "But God is the only light!" The boy stood up, donned his garments, and inquired, "But if God is within me, why should I seek?" The old man finished dressing and gazed awkwardly at the boy, replying, "God is in everything. You can find Him in all things." The boy, wearing a puzzled expression, persisted, "But how about God that is within me?" The old man sighed, "Our heart is not always at peace; that's why sometimes you find it so difficult to find the Light deep inside. But you have the mirrors, which are the nature or people around you—you can find God there!" The boy immediately recollected his friends and pondered intensely if he ever found Uru-watu in them. Eventually, the boy agreed that they could represent God's fidelity.

Novel-like version:

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As the surroundings were shrouded in dusk, they made the decision to spend the night by the river. A crackling fire cast its warm glow over the riverbank, where they sat facing each other, savoring baked fish for dinner. Stories began to unfold in the night, initiated by the boy, as tradition dictated. The boy commenced, for his grandfather had once instructed him to always initiate conversation when sitting with others. Thus, he began to recount his experiences as a seasoned shepherd.

He delved into his past struggles, recalling the first time he had shepherded alone without his grandfather's guidance. He vividly remembered the stressful moments when he had to venture back to the camp at night in search of a lost sheep. It had been a small sheep trapped amidst the tangle of trees. Fortunately, after a relentless search, the lost sheep was found!

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Clearly, he was a fearful boy, apprehensive of the dark, but in that moment, he discovered the art of befriending that which he feared. It was quite unlike befriending people, where a shared story could forge a bond in a matter of minutes. With nature, however, he realized that crafting a new story was essential to making a new friend, and, intriguingly, only both of them would be the main characters.

The intriguing aspect was that "the friendship formed through the creation of a story is more enduring

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than one built on the sharing of countless tales." The boy mused, "That's why nature is my best friend!"

Then, the boy began recounting other stories he had heard from his grandfather during those moments spent together with his late Mama. Among the tales, he found himself most captivated by the stories of the Rai-na'in, the malevolent spirits that lurked within the darkness, preying on the souls of those who traversed their domain. His grandfather had conveyed that these sinister entities held great power over those who succumbed to fear of the dark. However, for the courageous, the fire within their souls would repel the Rai-na'in and illuminate their path.

His grandfather had confronted numerous malevolent spirits during his journeys as a shepherd, yet he had never allowed the spirits to claim any of his flock, for he understood that his soul resided within the herd, just as the souls of the sheep resided within him.

The boy pondered his own encounters, realizing the absence of fear due to the Lady's presence in his heart. The old man, captivated by the boy's stories, witnessed the boy's resilience against the Rai-na'in. The night progressed, concluding the boy's narratives, prompting the old man to express amazement. Eager to hear the Lia-na'in's stories, the boy discovered the old man's past as a shepherd, challenging preconceptions about the Lia-na'ins' origins. The old man emphasized the importance of choosing one's path, guided by God.

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"I, too, was a shepherd like you when I was a young boy," the old man began. "What? How did you become a Lia-na'in then?" the boy was astounded, as he had never fathomed that a shepherd could transform into a Lia-na'in. He had always believed that Lia-na'ins were inherently born as such. Upon observing them, he had envisioned that the Lia-na'ins underwent training from a young age, learning the chants and other cultural practices, even adopting specific dress patterns, much like the shepherds, especially in his own experience.

The old man continued, "You may choose your path, but it is God who guides your way." These words resonated with the boy, and he held them close to his heart for contemplation. "Just like in your case!"

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However, as the boy sought clarification on the old man's cryptic statement, the old man turned away, leaving the boy in contemplation. Lying on a rock, the old man cryptically remarked, "Just like your case." Attempts to seek clarification were met with silence, prompting the boy to cease his inquiries out of respect for the elder. Lying on another rock, the boy grappled with the echoes of the enigmatic phrase. Looking up at the moonlit sky, memories of his grandfather flooded his thoughts, evoking deep sorrow. With the rosary beads in hand, he sought solace and drifted into a peaceful sleep.

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The following morning, the boy awoke to the rhythmic sound of water droplets splashing on the rock. Observing the rising water level, he speculated, "Perhaps heavy rain visited the mountain last night." Peering eastward, the distant mountain, concealed by fog, hinted at the approaching sunrise during the twilight as he rose.

After his morning prayers, an unfamiliar yet melodious flute tune captivated the boy's attention. Hastily checking his small bag, he discovered the absence of his flute. Determined to trace the source, he instinctively climbed, eventually realizing the music emanated from the top of a small mountain where water cascaded. Fatigue gripped him as he ascended from large rocks. Upon reaching the summit, he found the old man seated on a rock in the center of the flowing river, facing the Eastmountain, engrossed in playing the flute. Anger surged within the boy for the old man taking his flute without permission. Approaching with a furious expression, he was momentarily halted by a beam of sunlight, its brilliance rendering him speechless. The sun, emerging from behind the mountain, rose slowly, as if preserving the night's darkness.

As they sat peacefully on the rock, a synchronous greeting escaped both of them, "Good morning, Sun." The boy then extended the same courtesy to the old man, a ritual reminiscent of his interactions with the elder shepherds at the camp. Here, he was the youngest among

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his friends: friend Sun, River, Rock, and the towering old trees along the riverbank. Yet, some of these natural companions were younger than him—the sardines, salmons, the burgeoning trees and grasses, and the fresh mountain water.

Pondering, he mused, "The sun is younger than me! The youngest among all creatures. He stays perpetually young, reviving his life every morning, becoming a newborn baby anew each day!" Comparing his friend Sun to the cycle of human life, the boy observed, "Like a child, he was initially shy and apprehensive, seeking refuge behind the mountain. Charming and delightful, he captivates all with his beams. Everyone adores the morning sun. However, as he matures, he grows increasingly intense, and not all are eager to engage with him; the noon Sun's circle of friends dwindles." Reflecting further, he added, "Finally, as he becomes an afternoon Sun, his beams are as comforting as they were in the morning. Yet, as people embrace this, they hasten toward the night. They will miss his warmth."

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In that moment, he was reminded of his dearly missed grandmother. "Only the darkness of night can truly reveal the Sun's magnificence! Death unveils the true essence of a person's dignity."

After this contemplation, both rose and headed eastward, experiencing a newfound camaraderie born

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from shared experiences. Facing another jungle, less ominous than the previous one, beams of sunlight pierced through, painting the vibrant surroundings. The lively jungle teemed with greenery, singing birds, and fresh air. The trees generously offered fruits for breakfast, fostering a sense of friendship. The vast valley, reminiscent of the boy's cherished camp, unfolded before them, and the Lia-na'in revealed three more days to spend in this enchanting haven. Delighted by the prospect, the boy reveled in the valley's beauty, free from worries, as he blew his flute in harmony with the morning and evening birdsongs.

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On the initial day, the boy reveled in the immersive experience of nature. Awakened by the harmonious melody of birdsong, which he now considered as new friends, he used his flute to complement the choir. Greeting the young Sun transcended words, evolving into an expression through the flute, embracing the profound language of feelings and companionship. The boy pondered, "Feeling is the language of Nature; no words needed, only a sense of oneness." Communicating not with words, but with an internalized feeling, he embraced the vibrant green pastures, wildflowers, and the benevolent trees that bestowed generous fruits. His communion with nature deepened, perceiving subtle signs and movements as a reciprocal conversation.

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During moments of rest, the boy shared his book of poems with the old man, discovering a mutual appreciation for verse. The verses resonated, evoking joy and, at times, tears in the old man's eyes, accompanied by the applause of nature—winds, leaves, and grasses. The boy realized that nature, too, responded to the poems, acknowledging its own form of appreciation. Reflecting on this, he concluded, "They have their own way to appreciate; I can feel it." It was only the boy who noticed, for he had grown intimately close to nature. He keenly observed the subtle movements and signs within the natural world, realizing that they conveyed a myriad of words and emotions. He comprehended that nature possessed the ability to communicate with him in its own profound language.

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At times, while he conversed with the trees, grass, and rivers, calling them his new friends, he couldn't help but reminisce about his old companions: his flock. He found himself imagining what it would be like to bring his old friends to this new camp, adorned with lush greenery and a myriad of daisies. "My friends would thrive here," he mused. Yet, the boy also pondered the impracticality of such a venture; the journey would be arduous for his flock. They would grow weary easily and require frequent rest stops. Moreover, he harbored a great fear: the possibility of them becoming lost amidst the jungle while he slept. As a newcomer to this unfamiliar terrain,

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the prospect of searching for them in the event of their disappearance was daunting. The risk of losing them all at once weighed heavily on his mind.

As the boy reflected on his experiences, he came to a poignant conclusion: "Safety is more important than comfort," he affirmed. "A fat sheep is nothing when he is lost. And a thin sheep can grow fatter when he is with his shepherd." His thoughts oscillated between the past and the present, as he endeavored to find meaning in the moments he lived. It dawned on him that there existed no distinction between old and new friends; they were simply friends. His gaze drifted to the old man, now snoring after a long day's journey, prompting memories of his grandfather to surface. Before venturing into shepherding, he often adjusted the blanket of his slumbering grandfather. "Pa also snores... but not that loudly," he reminisced. Despite the age disparity, the boy felt justified in considering the old man his friend. He recalled his grandfather's wisdom, "Our souls never grow old." With this in mind, the boy retrieved his rosary beads and draped them around his neck before settling beneath a towering tree for the night. Their dinner comprised solely of grapes, a testament to the jungle's abundance of fruits nestled amidst its lush foliage. This posed no issue, as the boy had savored a plethora of fruits along the way and was now comfortably satiated.

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On the second morning in the jungle, the boy's awakening was graced by a woolly lamb, a two-month-old creature seeking companionship. With his wealth of experience, the boy swiftly established a rapport with the lamb, earning its trust in no time. Observing that the Lia-na'in was nowhere in sight, he closed his eyes in silent prayer, laying his right hand gently upon the lamb's head, soothing it with his touch. As the lamb's tongue lightly grazed his finger, its moist warmth lingered, and he concluded the prayer with a reverent sign of the cross. Retrieving his small bag and slinging it over his right shoulder, a sense of urgency overcame him as he recollected the previous morning's awakening. "Where is the sound of the flute?" he pondered, and upon inspecting his bag, he found the flute nestled within. Puzzled by the old man's apparent abandonment of the flute, he speculated that the latter must be positioned atop a lofty vantage point, awaiting the break of dawn. "He must be somewhere high to greet the sunrise; perhaps nearby," he surmised. Setting off, the lamb trailed behind him, unaccompanied by inquiries regarding the lamb's origins. Nevertheless, he harbored a certainty that the young lamb had strayed from its flock. His conviction stemmed from the belief that "There is no lone lamb, only a lost lamb," for sheep required guidance, lest they wander astray. "Where is your guide?" he softly inquired of the lamb, though he anticipated no response. Despite

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this, he sensed an unspoken understanding between the lamb and its absent shepherd.

With deliberate steps, the boy traversed the jungle, keenly attuned to any subtle indications that might lead him to the old man. His eyes darted about, searching eagerly for any trace. However, after an hour of fruitless wandering, the imminent sunrise compelled a sense of urgency within him. Spotting a sizable rock ahead, he swiftly ascended it, carrying the lamb to the pinnacle, as if to herald the return of his absent companion. "Good morning," he greeted his young comrade, as the sun timidly emerged, preparing to embrace the day. Unperturbed, he reassured himself that the Liana'in lingered somewhere within the jungle. Pressing onward, the Eastern mountain served as his guide, and he mused that it also steered the old man. "As long as we share the same destination, we tread a unified path," he contemplated, seeking solace in this notion. Moreover, his apprehensions were assuaged by his familiarity with the jungle—its denizens, flora, and terrain—making it feel like his own abode. "Why should I fear in my own home?" he pondered, casting a glance at the little lamb. "I have a friend here, perhaps separated from its owner, but not adrift within the jungle. This jungle is also its home. You never stray in your own home!"

The boy ambled along, his emotions a mélange of ponderings. He contemplated why the old man

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had left him in solitude. Was it due to the flute or was it an opportunity for him to stride forth as a man, unaccompanied? Nonetheless, he found solace in the burgeoning kinship he felt with nature. He deemed them friends, for they were true companions, providing sustenance, quenching his thirst with the river's water, and above all, offering their company. "In a journey, the important thing is not the destination or the path, but companionship," he reflected. Recording his insights in a book of poems, he inscribed them in the margins using graphite gathered from the river, the once empty pages now teeming with profound musings. "If you live to learn, you will learn to live," he mused. Despite his efforts, he felt that the book could not contain all the wisdom he had acquired. At times, he resorted to brief annotations or encoded words, privy only to himself. Yet, even with these measures, he sensed that the book remained inadequate, for the boy gleaned myriad lessons from the most inconspicuous occurrences. Recollecting a day when he reclined beneath a sprawling tree, its branches bereft of fruit, he contemplated the perspective of passersby. Some hungry travelers scorned him for bearing no fruit, while others, sated and weary, expressed gratitude for the respite he provided. He gleaned the lesson that "everyone is valuable in their own place and time," and with a smile, he etched this insight into the graphite. In that moment, he overflowed with gratitude.

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Amidst his sojourn, he continued to glean invaluable lessons from nature. Reflecting on this, he mused, "Nature never ceases to impart wisdom, or perhaps, it is we who never tire of learning. Hmm... it could be both! Learning is the one pursuit that the mind never exhausts, never fears, and never regrets." Unfalteringly, he pressed on towards the East mountain. With dusk descending, he sought shelter for the night. He harbored confidence that nearby villagers would provide refuge and information about the little lamb, the lost creature he had encountered. "Where is your home?" he inquired of the lamb, gazing into its eyes. "I am your friend, not your owner. Can you guide me to your home?" he implored, "You belong in the sheepfold with your friends and mother."

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In an instant, the little lamb pricked up its ears, its eager gaze darting about, before bolting swiftly towards the East. The boy, spurred into action, chased after with fervent haste. As night descended inexorably, the boy's visibility waned, his senses filled only with the rustling of dry leaves and the plaintive bleating of the lamb. After a time, the boy found himself disoriented, the moon's feeble light offering little guidance. Determined, he paused to gather sticks and dry leaves to fashion a torch, all the while sensing the lamb's plaintive cries growing distant. In the depths of his being, he implored divine assistance. "Help me, God! Help me, God!" echoed within, a testament to his faith in a higher power. Overwhelmed

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by urgency, his heart pounded in a frenzied rhythm, a relentless drummer in moments of anxiety, yet a discordant cacophony in times of uncertainty. With the torch finally ablaze, he pursued the lamb with unyielding bravery, buoyed by a spirit suffused with hope. "Hope is a universal virtue, enduring even in the absence of all else," he reflected, "for where there is hope, there is a path to light, and the bearers of hope are the children of light."He ran harshly through the darkness of the jungle with the troch in his hand that had the power to destroy the tyranny of the night. As he went through the weary path, he could sense that he awoke some creatures who lived in the darkness, and most probably he was the center of the jungle because he was the only one with light and brought light. He heard the owl's awaking sound and some other sleeping and awaking creatures.

After several minutes without hearing any more bleats, he slowed his pace to be more attentive, hoping to find clues to the little lamb's whereabouts. His steps became increasingly gentle and quiet, even quieter than his own breath, which he feared might awaken his friends. As his torch slowly burnt out, he paused to witness its demise in the enveloping darkness. Seated without light in his hands, but with a flickering flame burning within, he contemplated his surroundings. "Where is the light to guide me?" he pondered, wrestling with doubt. Yet, he calmed himself and began to observe his surroundings. Though nothing seemed

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clear, he held onto hope, knowing it would lead him towards the light. He empathized with the little lamb's sense of being lost, feeling almost as adrift himself. Fortunately, the same hope that sustained the lamb also kept his own spirit alive, preventing him from succumbing to the darkness. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and recalled a technique learned from the old man, believing in the wisdom imparted by his elders. As he stilled his mind, a sense of peace washed over him, clearing the muddy waters of his thoughts and revealing the path ahead. Now, with newfound clarity, he was ready to press onward.

"I am the light!" he proclaimed, his eyes alight with fervor. "When you find no light around you, look closely – perhaps you are the light," he mused, a smile gracing his lips as he embraced his spirit filled with hope and an unyielding fire. It was as though he possessed a torch that would never burn out, a flame that resided within his heart. Recalling the first poem from a book that had deeply resonated with him, he often recited its opening verse to his fellow shepherds during their time tending to the flock by the river, which he fondly named Esperanza. The verse that had left the greatest impression on him was, "follow your heart, for it knows all things." Now, this seemingly inconsequential verse proved to be his salvation in the midst of his predicament. The boy was astonished to realize that "nothing should be taken for granted; everything holds its value at the right time."

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He was filled with spirit and decided to follow and find the little lamb. He commited himself to not sleep if he could not find his friend. He walked and walked around the jungle towards the East mountain which always be his guidance. After few hours, the boy was tired and sat beneath in a big tree; he did not know what exactly the species of that tree, but he knew that it was so enormous. Subsequently, he fell asleep.

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PART III

The boy struggled to sleep, visibly perturbed by a troubling dream. His drenched appearance indicated a restless night, with incoherent murmurs escaping from his lips, as if his soul yearned to vocalize its distress. In his dream, he found himself once again in the jungle, confronted by the same terrifying vision. This time, however, he could distinguish one of the three figures standing on the large rock with him: Lia-na'in. As he turned to identify the other two, he was abruptly jolted from his dream by a sudden dousing of water to his face, accompanied by the forceful utterance of an unfamiliar language. Perhaps it was this individual who had roused him, prompting the boy to surmise as much in his mind.

With only half-opened eyes and thus an unclear sight, the boy could sense that he was unexpectedly in a different and new place, further obscured by the darkness. Many wooden bars surrounded him. Gaining full consciousness, he endeavored to understand his predicament. Despite attempting to move his hands, he found them bound tightly with string, yet his feet

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remained free. Anxiously, he inquired about his small bag, but it was nowhere to be found. Rising abruptly, he realized he was in a prison. "And my small bag?" the boy asked with high anxiety. He looked around and seemed like there was no sign of his small bag. Puzzled, he clutched the bars tightly, attempting to recall everything, but confusion clouded his memories. He remembered only sleeping under a large tree the previous night. "Only this and nothing more!" he concluded, for that was all he could recollect.

His wrists slowly began to ache. Inhaling deeply with all his strength and anger, he shouted loudly, "Oyy… Oyy!" repeatedly, while vigorously shaking the bars in an attempt to break free. After several minutes, exhaustion and the increasing pain in his hands forced him to stop. He sat down, taking deep breaths, and leaned against the bars, closing his eyes to calm himself and gather his strength. As he shut his eyes, the sound of chains echoed in the dark corner of the prison. Opening his eyes without any enthusiasm, he waited for a response without voicing a question. "What is that again?" he asked in his mind with anger.

"Calm down, boy!" a voice emerged from the darkness. Unsurprised, the boy sensed the presence of an old man similarly bound in chains. Exhaling deeply, he attempted to disregard the old stranger. Moving to another corner, he peered into the darkness, unable to see

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anyone but certain of the old man's presence. The prison remained shrouded in darkness. The boy's primary concern was to understand why he had been brought to this dark place. With no response forthcoming, he chose to lean against the wall and rest.

The boy awoke once more to the flickering light of the torch carried by the guard into his room. With a furious expression, the guard placed the torch on the wall beside the bars, casting a welcome brightness across the prison cell. Desperate to convey his plight, the boy called out to the guard, but his cries fell on deaf ears. "Oyy… Oyy!" he repeated, yet the guard continued to walk away, indifferent to his pleas. Gazing out, he noticed the multitude of barred rooms stretching out to his right and left. "A vast prison," he mused. As the room came into focus, he turned to seek the old man who had spoken to him, only to find no one there. "How could the old man vanish in an instant? And the chains! Where have they gone?" Confusion enveloped the boy as he grappled with the inexplicable events. Despite the creeping sense of horror, he tried to reassure himself that it was all an illusion. Perhaps the old man and the chains were mere figments of his imagination, conjured by the strain of the ropes binding his hands. Convinced that it was a hallucination, he wrestled with hunger, having had nothing to eat since inexplicably finding himself in the prison against his will.

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Desperately hungry, he attempted to lean against the bars, his stomach aching with emptiness. Seating himself, he gazed out at the illuminated rows of cells, pondering whether other prisoners in adjacent chambers suffered the same gnawing hunger. "But they don't cry out," he mused. It appeared as though they were either not afflicted or had grown accustomed to the pangs. Exhausted and famished, he settled back and succumbed to sleep, finding solace from the relentless hunger only in the realm of dreams.

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A sudden splash jolted him as a pot of water was hurled at his face once more. However, this time, it unfolded as per the carefully devised plan. The previous night, the boy had conceived the idea of feigning sleep to entice the guard back into his cell, providing him with a chance to set things straight. From beyond the cell, he heard the guard summoning him, yet he opted to remain motionless, pretending to be asleep. Consequently, the guard entered, clutching a pot of water in his right hand.

In the instant that water splashed across his face, the boy sprang to his feet, locking eyes with the guard with unwavering resolve. Despite the guard's evident surprise, the boy detected no hint of fear in his gaze, a realization that seemed to unnerve the guard in return. Though a flicker of trepidation crept through him, he had been

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taught never to reveal weakness in the presence of an adversary. Both stood their ground, their eyes devoid of fear but concealing it in the boy's heart. The guard then grasped the boy firmly, meeting his gaze before forcefully dragging him out of the cell. "Hey... Hey..." the boy protested at the guard's roughness. "Take it easy, man," he implored, but the guard remained stoic, propelling him forward along the row of cells. Falling silent, the boy sought distraction by peering into the neighboring cells, scanning for any sign of other prisoners.

"What!" the boy pondered. Each cell housed a pair of horses. It dawned on him that he was imprisoned in a stable, and the entire room was designed for the horses. Judging by their well-kept appearance, the animals were clearly cared for. "It's a barn," the boy mused. As they neared the door, the light revealed the figure of the guard. "A guard? No. There is no guard in a barn; perhaps he's the owner. But why does he behave so brusquely, like a guard from the tales," he mused, his mind clouded with confusion.

As the light gradually illuminated the enigmatic figure, it revealed a man of around forty years, a familiar face from the camp. Clad in a rough sackcloth, he seemed more likely to be a member of a farming family than a guard. The gate of the barn, worn and damaged, allowed the morning sun's rays to filter through the gaps. Advancing toward the gate with a sense of purpose, the man exerted force to swing

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it open. As the gate yielded to their efforts, they stepped outside, bathed in the glow of the rising sun, which cast its radiance upon the eastern mountain. The boy blinked as the sun's rays momentarily dazzled his eyes, then reopened them to behold the sun, poised at eye level due to their elevated vantage point. Positioned atop a mountain, facing the eastern peak, the barn afforded a familiar view, one the boy had often beheld.

"Good morning," the boy greeted, drawing a deep breath and relishing the sensation of freedom as though he had already been liberated. "You always feel free around your friends," he mused, "freedom is a sign of friendship." Upon opening his eyes, he realized that the enigmatic figure, with a guard-like demeanor, had released his hands. Standing beside him, the man mirrored his actions, clasping his hands and moving his lips as if uttering silent words. "Some sort of chant, perhaps!" the boy speculated.

Gazing downward, the boy beheld a verdant valley dotted with towering, age-old trees. He sensed that he was nearing his destination. "Just a valley to reach you," he silently reflected. The valley appeared relatively brief, and his goal lay within sight; a mere step separated him from victory. Though elated, he concealed his joy, reserving it within his heart. His foremost priority now lay in navigating a path out of this bewildering prison. Deep down, he yearned for escape, yet not through

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violent means. He sought to uncover the reasons behind his confinement in this barn-like structure; to understand the enigmatic individuals who held him captive. Their language, their motives—he craved answers before plotting his next move.

Some time later, the boy glanced at the enigmatic man and made the sign of the cross. A smile graced his lips upon realizing that they shared the same faith. "It will be okay, I know!" he reassured himself, watching as his fears melted away. With this newfound knowledge, he began to exude a sense of resilience, devoid of any internal trepidation. Observing his hands, marked with crimson lines from the tightly bound ropes, he offered solace to his aching wrists, "You will be okay later."

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After making the sign of the cross, the mysterious man locked eyes with the boy, his gaze intense and unwavering. Slowly, his hand crept towards his pocket, retrieving a small, gleaming object resembling a knife. An abrupt shift in the atmosphere ensued; the boy trembled, struggling to conceal his overwhelming fear. His breath grew erratic, and even the crisp morning air failed to soothe him. Then, unexpectedly, the man employed the knife to sever the ropes binding the boy's hands. Overwhelmed, the boy shut his eyes, anticipating a heavenly sight upon reopening them. However, he found himself liberated from the restraints, yet still ensnared within the prison-like ambiance.

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"Go forth!" commanded the mysterious man, directing the boy to the other side of the barn. As he walked, the boy stretched his hands, attempting to alleviate the lingering pain. Liberated from the confines of his will, he reached the backyard, fortunate to behold the lush greenery of rice floodplains, flanked by rivers on either side of the rice floodplains. Observing diligent workers in the fields wearing hats to shield themselves from the sun, the boy recalled his grandfather's advice: "If you wake up late, others will achieve ten times better results." Seating himself, he found solace in the scene.

Seated beside him, the mysterious man broke the silence, "So, you like the view, Makrus!" Despite his astonishment, the boy chose to feign indifference. This situation mirrored past encounters, like the one with Lia-Na'in, but this stranger misspelled his name, reminiscent of his grandfather's errors. "I don't know and don't care how he can know my name, a misspelled name," declared the boy, purposefully fixating on the rice floodplains below, signaling his disinterest. The man rose and entered the barn, sparing the boy from further consoling attempts. Reveling in the embrace of nature, he considered this a small victory against distractions. The boy cherished nature, especially its verdant hues, believing they kept the eyes younger daily.

"This!" A sudden voice jolted him as the strange man tossed his small bag at him. The boy felt a surge of anger,

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akin to being punched in the back. Inhaling deeply, he sought composure without turning around. Swiftly checking the bag's contents—rosary beads, a lighter, a flute, a betel leaf, areca nut, and the book—he turned with simmering anger, fixing his gaze on the strange man who seemingly read through the pages with a perplexed expression. Laying his right hand on the book, he demanded, "Give me that one. It is mine!"

"Are you Makrus?" The strange man uttered the wrong name, reading it from the first page. The boy, with a stoic face, affirmed, "Yes!" In his heart, he realized how the strange man knew his name, albeit incorrectly, as penned by his grandfather. Somehow, the strange man had delved into the book's pages during the so-called imprisonment. Perhaps he could read the poems, yet none of his writings were decipherable as he employed codes known only to him. "That's clandestine!"—a term his grandfather had taught him.

Persistently, the strange man insisted on reading, displaying an unfamiliarity with handling an old book—flipping pages carelessly. Losing patience, the boy snatched the book from the strange man's hands, storing it in his bag while maintaining eye contact. The strange man smiled at his anger. "I have mine, you know!" he declared, "newer than that! You can have it if you want." The boy, skeptical of his words, turned away from the strange man.

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Suddenly reversing, the boy confronted the strange man, echoing words from the prison. "Hey... hey..." he repeated, questioning his circumstances. "Why am I here? Where am I? Why am I imprisoned? Why do you treat me so rudely? Who are you? What is the name of this place?" His lamentation echoed, a fervent plea for liberty. The strange man stayed silent with a stoic expression and fixed eyes. Undeterred, the boy continued his desperate questioning. "If you don't know, then I forgive you. I want to go now," he declared, turning away. Abruptly, the strange man seized his hands, forcefully pulling him back until he fell. "Because you killed our friends!" the strange man shouted, pointing accusingly at the boy's eyes. Terrified and confused, the boy stood up. "Me? Killing your friends?" he pointed to himself, indignant. "I have never done this." Anger simmered beneath his confusion as he aimed to resolve this nonsensical accusation. "Both of you!" the strange man gently replied, leaving the boy in a state of silent bewilderment, fully aware of the weight of every word and the consequence of each silence in that tumultuous moment.

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"Both of you: your friend and you," the strange man explained, his face assuming the rudeness befitting a true guard. "He admitted it and was set free! Honesty is everything in order to be free! And you? A liar." The strange man circled the boy, staring at him fixedly, as he continued, "People say it rightly, 'the robbers will never

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admit that there are robbers.'" The contagious atmosphere did not sway the boy's steadfast belief in his innocence. He remained convinced he had done nothing wrong.

"Stop it! Please!" The boy's anger resurfaced. "Can you tell me the truth? You're wasting my time, and I am kind enough to forgive your nonsense. "You burnt the forest, boy!" the man shouted directly at the boy's face, the echoes resonating through the valley. The man, fueled by anger, continued, "You burnt the forest that night, and now you act so good. That night, one of my people luckily discovered it while searching for his lost lamb. He alerted the entire village, and we successfully extinguished the fire." The tension heightened as the strange man accused, "You were there sleeping, you were there!"

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With eyes brimming with tears, some drops falling from his cheeks, the boy recalled that fateful night when he rushed to follow the lost lamb, inadvertently causing a fire with his makeshift torch. The lost lamb belonged to one of the people in this village. Every detail flooded back, and the boy admitted to himself, "He is right! I am wrong!" He dropped his little bag to the ground. The strange man pointed to a spot about 5 kilometers away, a darkened area due to the fire.

The boy wept and sat down, repentant. "I am sorry!" he expressed remorse. "It's okay. Your sentence is over; you may go now." The man calmed down and hugged the

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boy, apologizing for the wrongful imprisonment. "You are just a boy; you didn't do such a thing intentionally. And I read your book; I liked it, full of life. That's why I released you after completely reading your book. It is quite thick." The boy, contemplating the depth of well-written books, mused, "If the book is well written, I always find it too short."

"I am the chief here. I command you to go and never return again," declared the man. "Thank you and sorry," the boy apologized. "But where did you send my old friend?" The boy instantly recalled that the man might be Lia-Na'in. "Is he truly your friend?" the man asked, his expression one of confusion. "Then, why did he leave you? And you are a boy, it's not usual to have an old man as a friend," he added. "Yes, he is. But it is a long story. Just tell me where did he go," the boy requested. "He said he went to the Matebian." "Mate...bian? Where is this place?" the boy asked, bewildered. The man turned his back and pointed to the East mountain. The boy now realized that the East mountain was indeed called Matebian. "Why did he go there?" the boy inquired, marveling at the grandeur of the mountain. "Hehehe... what a question! You are friends, you must know the reason. In fact, you should have the goal clear before you start a journey," the man chuckled. "I did not follow your friend because I do not want to enter your business, and if I am curious, I have you inside the barn to ask," the chief countered. "I

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also do not know! I just followed him to that mountain," the boy said, a tinge of sadness in his voice as he recalled his grandfather's directive but chose not to dwell on that reason. "The one who brought you here will bring you further," the chief assured him.

"But have you been there?" the boy asked eagerly, turning his face toward the chief. "Wait here!" Suddenly, the chief went inside the barn for several minutes. When he returned, he brought oranges, knowing the boy had not eaten for many days. Both of them enjoyed the fruit, with the boy eating hastily due to his hunger. After a few bites, they resumed their conversation, sitting down.

"No, I have never gone there before," the chief admitted. "Nothing is there. Just a mountain." The boy stood up, objecting, "Hey, don't judge. How can you say nothing is there if you've never been there once?""Well, some stories told by the ancestors mention a hidden treasure there! But since treasure means nothing to me, I have the right to say that 'nothing is there!'" the man laughed. "I also have no interest in treasure. My treasure is my sheep, my friends indeed." He added, "My grandfather once told me that where my treasure is, there my heart is as well. On that day, I realized that my heart is in my sheep as theirs are in me."

The chief and the boy walked back to see the rice floodplains again. "It is mine! It is my treasure. My heart

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is in this village; the greenness of the rice floodplains, the people exulting by each day working, the fresh air of morning, the children playing kites, and the forest that keeps us alive. Indeed, nature is where our God reveals Himself," the chief expressed, pointing to all the valleys.

The boy found solace in discovering a village aligned with his desires. A village that revered Nature as the dwelling place of God, a lesson he had written about in his book. Placing his hands on his chest to check his heartbeat, the boy mused, "I think I have found it! The place where my heart resides!" He laughed heartily, turned to the chief, and exclaimed, "A herd. May you give me a herd to tend?"

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PART IV

Before the sun rose, the boy already woke up, kindled the candle, and prayed the morning prayer. Although there was no image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, he believed she resided in his heart, guiding him through the toughest and darkest forests. "She knew the way and led me to this place where my heart dwells."

After finishing his prayer, the boy blew out the candle, recalling the times he had to fix his grandfather's blanket, ensuring he was well covered before leaving. He looked at his crook and small bag in the corner, containing a flute to animate his friends, rosary beads for safety, betel leaf, areca nut, and a book. He no longer brought the lighter, as there were no tubers to bake in this new village, only fruits. Despite considering bringing the lighter for late returns, he decided against it to avoid accidentally burning the forest again. Promising not to repeat that mistake, he relied on the light from the chief's house on the top of the mountain when returning late, guiding him back to the village before dawn.

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The people in the village were friendly, and though he was new, it felt like he had lived there for over ten years. Living in the valley near the rice floodplains, he tended a sheepfold with fewer than twenty sheep. The sheep in the village were different, sometimes unorganized, making it challenging to tend fewer than the seventy he had in Esperanza. In the first month, he invited a young boy named Rafael to accompany him during shepherding, learning the intricacies of shepherding in the jungle. As he adjusted, the boy felt more comfortable, meeting new friends and enjoying the company of the elders, who shared valuable life lessons.

Contrary to the camp's stories centered around the Rain-Na'in, the village stories focused on the luck encountered during shepherding. The boy soon realized that the tales he had heard had a profound impact on his life as a shepherd. The fortunate stories kindled a fire within him, motivating him to rise each day with an ignited spirit, tend to his sheep, and return home with a heart brimming with pride. In contrast, the chilling stories he had encountered at his camp occasionally instilled fear of the darkness and solitude, casting a shadow over his otherwise tranquil nights.

The boy, still remembered the first tale from the eldest shepherd, Katuas. It spoke of a bird-like creature called Kerub, with the head of a lion, a body of a lamb, and wings of an eagle, considered the guardian of shepherds.

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Katuas recounted an encounter with wolves during his youth, emphasizing the mystical creature's protection and how it instilled courage among the shepherds. The stories in the village, contrasting with those in the camp, influenced the boy's spirit, motivating him to face each day with fervor and pride after shepherding.

In that pivotal moment, both the herd and the young Katuas sensed a shift in the atmosphere, freezing in anticipation of an imminent wolf attack. In the dim half-light of the impending dawn, the boy could discern the glint of red eyes belonging to the encircling wolves. A shiver ran down his spine as he grappled with the overwhelming sense of fear that engulfed him in that moment of uncertainty. With nothing but his bare hands at his disposal, he sought solace in comforting the trembling lambs, offering them a semblance of protection from the lurking peril. The weight of his responsibility bore heavily upon him, for he could not deceive the sheep; they were all too familiar with the perils that lurked in the darkness, having already lost some of their own to such harrowing encounters.

"As is customary, some may be sacrificed for the greater good in case of an attack—the proverbial black sheep," the shepherd remarked. Yet, an unexpected turn unfolded as a distant roar echoed through the air, unfamiliar to their ears. "I had never encountered such a sound," he mused, describing the mysterious creature

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soaring above, its wings stirring the forest into a frenzy of flying leaves.

The elder shepherd's eyes widened as he recounted the defining moment, emphasizing the intense wind that compelled him to shield his eyes while cradling the lamb. Suddenly, the colossal creature descended before him, unleashing a thunderous roar etched in his memory. "Whenever I recollect that roar, my ears insist that its echo persists," the Katuas declared, his gaze encompassing the circle of shepherds.

The attentive young shepherd, previously exposed to the tale through a friend, now grasped the narrative with newfound clarity. He had doubted the story before, but the contagious sincerity in the Katuas' eyes convinced him of the existence of this jungle protector. Once the boy was told by the Lia-Na'in that the way to discover a lye is to look at the eyes of the speaker.

Embracing the role of a shepherd in that village was a matter of great pride, reserved for only the most courageous of men. When the boy expressed his desire to become a shepherd, the chief cautioned him about the formidable challenges that lay ahead. "Walking in darkness and battling against the wolves is no simple feat," the chief solemnly reminded him. Concerned about the boy's awareness of the dangers associated with shepherding, the chief hesitated. However, the boy's

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unwavering confidence, rooted in his past experience as a shepherd prior to his arrival in the village, ultimately convinced the chief to entrust him with a herd. "I carry the soul of a shepherd," the boy declared, leaving no doubt in the chief's mind about his deep connection to this timeless vocation.

Upon joining the ranks of the shepherds, the boy keenly felt the weight of attention from the villagers. Indeed, in this close-knit community, the arrival of a new shepherd was a matter of profound significance. To earn the esteemed title, one had to undergo a ritual overseen by the Katuas, the revered elder shepherd, and witnessed by the entire village. The ritual commenced with the sacrifice of a reddish rooster, its blood anointing the new shepherd's head, chest, and hands amidst ancient incantations. This solemn ceremony gave way to a jubilant celebration, where the villagers danced around the crackling fire, accompanied by the haunting melodies of the tambour and the heartfelt strains of folk songs. The shepherds, as the custodians of the village's prized possessions - the sheep - were held in the highest regard, a fact that filled the villagers with profound joy. As the boy partook in the ritual alongside Rafael, he not only embraced his new identity but also found a steadfast companion in the realm of shepherding.

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In the tranquil moments between tending the flock, the young shepherds would often convene to share their tales and confidences. These clandestine gatherings were held in a secluded spot, carefully chosen to ensure their conversations remained shielded from the ears of their elders. Their stories diverged from the mystical accounts of the older shepherds, veering instead towards musings on the mystical creatures and folklore, yet more often than not, their narratives revolved around the enchanting girls of the village. When a young shepherd found himself smitten, he would divulge his affection to his peers, seeking to safeguard the object of his affection from unwanted attention. In the event that two shepherds harbored feelings for the same maiden, tradition dictated that the younger of the two should yield to the elder. The boy, not the youngest among them, found himself amidst this delicate dance of youthful infatuation and camaraderie. Upon disclosing their crushes, the young shepherds would seek each other's counsel, fostering a sense of unity and mutual support. Yet, when a shepherd finally won the heart of his beloved and embarked on a life together, he would graduate from the ranks of the young shepherds, joining the esteemed elder shepherds. No longer would the tales center on the allure of the village maidens; instead, their conversations would delve into weightier matters, bestowing upon them the wisdom needed to lead their own families.

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It had been a dozen times that, in turn, the boy did not say anything. He simply told them that he had not fallen in love with any girl in the village. However, his heart told a different story; he had fallen in love with a beautiful girl who lived as his neighbor. Her name was Fulan, named after the brightest orb of the night: the moon. 'Actually, she is my moon,' the boy thought in his heart on the night of the bright moon. 'You, Fulan, in my darkness of night!' The boy was so passionate about this girl in a way he had never experienced before. He was feeling an emotion that his heart had never known before. He had written numerous poems about this girl as he sat in the fresh night air of the bright moon. Looking up at the moon, every word came to him to write into a poem. The only image in his mind was of that beautiful girl, whom his heart knew better than his eyes.

This clandestine affair was known only to Rafael, his closest companion, to whom he poured out his stories, musings, and emotions. None of the young shepherds had any inkling of this secret. Fortunately, during their storytelling sessions, her name never surfaced. His greatest dread was that an elder shepherd might inadvertently mention her name. However, as luck would have it, this had yet to occur. Despite his apprehension, he had not found the courage to disclose the truth to them. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that one day, he would have to reveal the existence of that enchanting girl to all

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of them before it was too late. "I cannot bear to lose her! I must win her heart," he confided in his best friend.

At times, the boy found himself pondering why the other shepherds, particularly the elders, had not fallen in love with the most captivating girl in the village. "What is wrong with their eyes?" he mused. "Perhaps love is a matter of the heart, not the eyes!" he concluded. With this notion in mind, he penned, "You don't love someone for their looks, but because they sing a song only you can hear." The boy grappled with the ambiguity of it all, knowing only that he had fallen in love with the most exquisite girl he had ever laid eyes upon. He vowed to one day confide in all his fellow shepherds about his love for her, and ultimately, to make her his wife.

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One evening, as the shepherds returned to the village after a long and weary day, his best friend approached him and uttered, "One day you will wake up and there won't be any more time to do the things you've always wanted to do. Do it now!" The boy paused, gazing at Rafael for a brief moment. He drew in a deep breath and smiled as he nodded. In that instant, the boy comprehended precisely what his best friend was alluding to. It was about the most beautiful girl he had ever yearned to share his life with—Fulan.

Upon returning home that night, after guiding the herd to their resting place, the boy found himself standing

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before his own dwelling, gazing at the house of the girl who had captured his heart. He observed the warm glow of candlelight emanating from within her home, and the murmur of voices drifting through the air. Settling down, he realized that he needed to confess his feelings to the girl without delay. "Tomorrow?" he murmured to himself, pressing his hands against his chest and sensing the hastened rhythm of his heart. Under the luminous night sky, illuminated by the full moon, he revisited the verses he had penned in his book, each inspired by the beloved of his heart. The boy had lost count of the poems he had written for her, and he had no desire to keep track. "As long as the moon lights up the night, I will continue to write poems for her," he vowed, consumed by his deep affection for the girl.

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Every time he tended to the sheep, he made a point to pass by the girl's house, cherishing any opportunity to encounter her and her friends on their way to the rice floodplains. Greeting the girls with tenderness and locking eyes with his beloved, he found solace in the smiles they exchanged. It seemed that the girls had grown accustomed to his presence, particularly his desired one, who would smile from a distance. Her smile was everything to him, marking the beginning of his day. As he moved on, he would glance back at the girl, offering a smile of his own while placing a hand over his heart and drawing a deep breath. This routine was known only

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to his friends; they bleated after he greeted the girl, as if in approval. "Seems like she likes you as well," the boy remarked to the sheep.

"Yes, next morning," the boy pondered. "I have to confess my love for her tomorrow morning. Perhaps she doesn't know my name, but she has grown accustomed to my face, my greetings, and my loyal companions." That night, he lit the candles and offered a prayer to Mother Mary. To him, Mother Mary was not only a divine figure, but also a symbol of feminine understanding, the best advocate for winning a girl's heart. However, he acknowledged that the true blessing would come from Uru-watu; Mother Mary was merely the conduit, albeit the best one. As he recited the rosary, his sole intention was clear: to win the heart of Fulan, his beloved.

After offering his prayers, the boy would typically eat and retire to bed, but this night was unlike any other. He was determined not to sleep, instead devoting his hours to crafting the perfect words for the next day. Pacing back and forth, he labored over his thoughts, endeavoring to form words as beautiful as the girl herself. Yet, as he pondered, he realized that mere words could not do justice to her beauty. He also practiced his gestures, envisioning how he should comport himself in her presence. "I've never attempted this before," he reflected, "but I will try my best."

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Most of his friends, including Rafael, had relied on the traditional method of confessing their feelings by writing letters to their beloved, with direct verbal confession being a rare and daring feat reserved for the experienced few. Hearing these accounts, the boy resolved to eschew letter-writing and instead speak directly to the girl. He believed that his boldness would kindle even deeper affection within her. Despite his lack of experience, he was resolute in taking this risk the following morning. With his preparations complete, he finally allowed himself to rest, knowing that the next day would be the most pivotal of his life.

"If she accepts me, I will be the luckiest man in the world," he mused, "but if not, I will spend my life cherishing the flower that I wished to plant in the soil of my heart." The boy had contemplated every outcome, and he was prepared for whatever the future held. After taking a deep breath and placing his hands over his heart, he drifted off into a restless sleep.

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Early in the morning, the boy awoke with the awareness that this day held great significance for him. Lighting the candles, he offered a prayer of gratitude for the new day. As he closed his eyes, the girl's image appeared before him, prompting him to seek Mother Mary's intercession once more. Afterward, he set out from his home, leading his herd along with him.

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The morning wind on that particular day was exceptionally friendly, tenderly kissing the boy's cheek with genuine gentleness. He had always been a friend of nature. "Brother wind, you know what is going to happen but don't tell me early," the boy murmured to the morning wind. The sheep baaed as they exited the sheepfold. As usual, just at daybreak, before the sun emerged from the East Mountain, the boy set off for the jungle. His steps were firm, confidently treading the solid soil as if he owned the day. "This is my day!" he declared with conviction.

From a distance, the boy could discern the girls approaching as a group. As his flock moved alongside him, he strode forward to meet them. In his mind, there was only Fulan, and in his heart, just the two of them. He walked with the determination of a warrior who had trained for years to conquer a desired land where his treasure, his heart, resided. The boy advanced, holding onto his thoughts like a sword to vanquish the tyranny of a thousand nights of fantasy. He resolved to no longer be a slave to fantasy, but a prince of a kingdom that he was about to build together with his beloved princess.

As the boy approached, the girl smiled as usual, but everything changed in an instant. His knees weakened, and the spirit of a warrior no longer held him tightly. His heart raced, his breath became erratic, and he swallowed hard before abruptly walking away without even greeting

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the girls as he usually did. He walked with his gaze fixed on the ground as they passed by in silence. Every word escaped him, and he buried his feelings deep within his heart. After they had passed, he paused and glanced back, but nothing transpired. He longed to call out or take some action, but he found himself unable to make a decision, his mind blank and his body paralyzed. As he watched the girl he longed for pass by, it felt like the end of everything he had hoped for. "Baa... baa," his friends understood this feeling all too well. Inhaling deeply, the boy turned and walked toward the jungle without looking back again.

He walked toward the jungle with the demeanor of a shepherd devoid of feeling, simply a caretaker whose heart only knew how to love his flock as his dearest companions. Despite the ache in his heart and the longing for the village he had left behind, he knew that it was all over. There was nothing more for him to do but tend to his flock: exchanging pleasantries with the elder shepherds, bonding with the young shepherds who were his lifelong companions, and guiding his flock to the river and the expansive green pastures of the camp. In the evening, before returning home, he would uplift the spirits of all the shepherds by playing his flute, the only talent through which he had gained renown among their ranks. Then, as always, he would make his way home.

Upon returning home, the boy was unexpectedly struck by a small stone thrown from behind by a stranger.

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Turning around, he saw Rafael approaching with a beaming smile and an infectious energy in his stride. Rafael embraced the boy from behind, exclaiming, "Congratulations... congratulations!" Despite Rafael's enthusiasm, the boy remained despondent, trudging along as if nothing had occurred, his gaze fixed downward. "What's wrong, my friend? Tell me, how did it go?" Rafael persisted in pushing the boy as if he were a victorious warrior, but the boy remained silent. "Well, then, tell me when you will go to her house! Just that," his best friend relented in trying to lift his spirits. Stepping in front of the boy, Rafael halted him. "Mak, Mak, look at me!" Rafael sensed that perhaps the boy had not succeeded in his confession and sought to console him in another way.

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"It's okay," Rafael began to speak gently, and the evening became even more serene for the boy. "You know, my grandfather once said, 'If you fall in love with a beautiful flower, then do not pick it, because as soon as you pick it, it will die and will no longer be beautiful,'" he added, "love is all about appreciating, not possessing." His best friend endeavored to alleviate the weight that burdened the boy. Nevertheless, the boy remained lost in thought. They walked in silence for some distance as the sun slowly disappeared beyond the horizon.

As they reached the crossroads that led them in separate directions, the boy veered to the right without bidding farewell. Just as Rafael was about to depart

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without a word, he paused and watched the boy walk with his head bowed. Suddenly, he rushed after the boy and forcibly halted him. This time, his expression was filled with anger as he sought to understand what had transpired with his best friend. If the boy had been rejected by the girl, Rafael was determined to help him move on. They stood face to face in silence, the night partially enveloping the sky at that poignant moment.

The boy then smiled at his friend. "Thank you, my friend," he said, embracing him tightly. "You did it, Mak?" Rafael asked with a hopeful expression. "No!" "What? Then... were you rejected?" "No!" Suddenly, Rafael released the hug and inquired, "Say a word about what happened, Mak." The boy smiled and exclaimed enthusiastically, "I did not... did not tell her! But..." "What?" Rafael interrupted, "Why? Why didn't you tell her?" "I'm no longer in love with her, so it's okay. Right, my friend!" The boy nudged his best friend, trying to convince him that he was okay. "No, no... Mak," Rafael was emotional, "It is not okay! You have to tell her."

"Baa... baa," the sheep seemed to be sounding an alarm as darkness gradually enveloped the entire valley. "Ohhh, sorry, my friends! See you, Raf," the boy hurriedly walked faster, aiming to lead his herd swiftly back to their home and his own. He left his best friend abruptly, as if fleeing from the conversation, expressing gratitude to his friends for providing him with an authentic excuse.

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Upon reaching home, he directed the sheep to their fold and promptly retreated to his room, letting out a loud shout, burdened with stress. His heart felt empty, yet it pained him like a needle of chewing. He tossed his crook and bag into a corner, then sat with his face downturned beside his bed, a few drops escaping from his eyes. He no longer heeded the advice to not cry as a man, as his heart was overwhelmed by sorrow that he could no longer contain. Then, everything went dark.

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As dawn broke, the boy was startled awake by the morning chill. He realized that he had drifted off to sleep last night while sitting beside his bed. Sensing a slight ache in his neck from the awkward position, he tried to ease the discomfort and then felt the wind whispering that it was almost time to shepherd again. Walking to the table, he lit the candles to pray. Suddenly, a wave of hurt washed over him. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and offered everything to Uru-watu, as well as his day. A smile graced his face after the prayer. "I am okay with my shepherds," he thought, "my friends of life." He reassured his heart by recalling the time when his grandmother passed away. "Life is a balance between holding on and letting go," he pondered, "and if you are brave enough to say goodbye, life will reward you with a new hello." Immediately, he considered the possibility that perhaps one day he would encounter another girl

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even more beautiful than Fulan. In his heart, he believed that perhaps God allowed this to happen so that he could find something better. With this resolve, he set out to lead his friends to the camp, where they could embrace the day without lingering sorrow.

"Who knows, there is another girl in the side of the village who is more beautiful than this," the boy mused as he walked, conversing with the youngest sheep that trailed closely beside him. Though he had resolved not to dwell on this matter any longer, his mind remained preoccupied with thoughts of the girl. They continued their journey as usual, him leading the sheep, embracing the routine of a shepherd.

Once again, from a distance, he spotted the group of girls making their way as usual. His heart fluttered at the sight, but he quickly composed himself, reassuring his heart that everything was in the past, and his only concern should be the growing flock of sheep. He walked with a newfound resolve, whispering to himself, "Nothing to do to impress anyone; just us, my friends."

As they drew nearer, the boy made a point to meet the gaze of each girl before offering his morning greeting, following the unspoken rule of showing gentleness. "Good morning," he greeted them, his voice betraying a hint of confusion as he sensed something amiss in his world—the absence of the girl, Fulan. Even as he

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cast a backward glance at the group, she was nowhere to be found, leaving him perplexed. Quickly, he tried to convince himself that he should no longer concern himself with her. "It is not important," he muttered under his breath as he journeyed on, making his way through the kilometers before reaching the jungle. He knew that her house was just a short distance ahead, and he decided to check there. With a newfound determination, he continued his walk, trying to shake off the unease that lingered within him.

"Good morning," a familiar voice greeted the boy from behind, stirring a sense of recognition within him. It was, indeed, a girl. "Fulan?" he pondered silently before eagerly turning around to confirm. There she was, standing in front of her house, a fact he had momentarily forgotten as he had just passed by. "Hey, good morning," he responded, their eyes locking in a moment of shared understanding. The boy's heart no longer raced, instead, a tranquil calm settled within him. His eyes did not deceive him; she was truly beautiful. "Do you want to talk with me?" she asked, stepping closer to him. Drawn to her, the boy also moved nearer, captivated by her captivating eyes. This was the second time he had the opportunity to converse with the most beautiful girl in his world. The first time had been during the ceremony where he was granted the role of a shepherd. It was then, as he watched the girl dance around the fire, that he first

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laid eyes on her enchanting smile, her windswept hair, and, most importantly, her gentle nature. It was during that encounter that he learned her name, "Fulan," she had said. In return, he shared his name with her, opting for the shorter form, "Mak," to make it easier to remember, just as he had done with Rafael. However, he couldn't be certain if she still remembered his name, given the numerous men who had likely introduced themselves to her. Nonetheless, what truly mattered was that she still recognized his face, a stroke of luck owing to their status as neighbors. Every day, they crossed paths, and each time, she greeted him with a warm smile.

The wind blew, the sun was rising slowly from the Eastern mountain, his heart rested so peacefully, and the boy killed his fantasy without becoming a warrior. He confessed all in his heart to the girl.

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PART V

The boy endured a restless night, visibly perturbed by his dreams. His face bore the evidence of being drenched in sweat, and indistinct murmurs escaped his mouth, as if his soul yearned to release an anxious shout. Abruptly, he snapped out of the dream, spurred by some mysterious energy that jolted him awake. His breath became uncontrollably rapid, and his heart thumped with alarming speed, rendering him visibly frightened, unaware that his distress had also unsettled his sheep. The herd baaed and stirred in response to his agitation. Sensing something amiss, the boy knew he had to return home immediately.

Taking his crook, hanging his small bag, and playing a hurried tune on his flute, the boy signaled the sheep to follow him. Despite the notes lacking their usual melodious quality, the sheep obediently trailed behind him. Anxious and unable to concentrate, the boy rushed out of the jungle, urging the herd to keep pace.

His dreams had revisited him, the same terrifying vision that haunted him within the jungle. This time, he

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recognized another figure among the three standing on the imposing rock alongside Lia-na'in—the head of the village.

Exiting the jungle, he proceeded homeward without dwelling on his thoughts. In route, as was his habit, he passed by Fulan's house. From a distance, he observed a crowd gathering at Fulan's residence. Puzzled, he speculated, "Something must be happening," questioning why Fulan hadn't mentioned it that morning. Recalling the times, he accompanied her to the rice floodplains before tending to his shepherding duties, the boy cherished the countless stories they shared. Having the girl by his side during these moments made him feel incredibly fortunate, finding echoes of his grandmother in her. He expressed gratitude to Rafael for informing the girl about his intentions that day, even if without his consent. Remembering his grandfather's wisdom about a shepherd's wife being a good listener due to the abundance of stories, the boy found solace in Fulan. She harbored a sanctuary within her, a place where he could find peace amidst his stories, especially the monthly poems he offered during the full moon.

The boy approached, sensing a hesitancy within himself. He noticed a stick outside the house with a black skiff tied above. "Someone has departed," he surmised, "but who?" Leaving the sheep at a distance from the gathering, he entered the house amid the crowd. As he

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drew closer, the mournful cries of relatives became more audible. His steps halted as he witnessed Fulan crying beside someone's lifeless body—the village head. Tears streamed down the boy's face, leaving him in a state of numbness, comprehending little of the unfolding events. The complexities enveloped him like an enigma, rendering him incapable of grasping even a grain of understanding from the vast ocean of occurrences. Embracing the grieving girl, he wept for her loss.

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Restlessly pacing in front of his house, the boy reflected on the recent events that had disrupted his life. The passages of his existence weighed heavily on his mind, depriving him of sleep that night.

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"Why does the dream come back?" Confusion clouded his thoughts as he had believed he achieved life's goal—living in the village, having a perfect girl and faithful friends. A perfect haven. Yet, the recurring nightmare puzzled him, haunting him a year after departing from village life. Uncertainty shrouded his every contemplation. One thing was certain—those standing behind him in the dream, Lia-na'in and the chief, were lost. Now, one more person awaited a similar fate, an impending loss he dared not imagine. Silently, he accepted it, choosing quiet introspection, and seated himself, gazing at the moon.

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Recalling the afternoon when he was designated the next village head if he married the chief's oldest daughter, Fulan, he appeared composed but harbored inner confusion. Recognizing the need to decide, he pondered, "The problems we don't fix become our limits." Choosing one path meant sacrifice—"If I don't sacrifice for what I want, what I want becomes the sacrifice." Amid conflicting thoughts, he affirmed, "Impossible is just an opinion." It was not impossible for him to find the best decision.

The decision between becoming the village head with the beautiful Lou (queen)or continuing his journey to the East Mountain posed a dilemma. Both options held merit, but determining which was better proved challenging. Sleepless, he ascended the hill that night, where the chief once resided, clutching a torch. Driven by an unknown force, he climbed until reaching the spot where he was once imprisoned. The horses within recognized him, their sounds echoing a welcoming tone.

At the summit, he extinguished the torch under the brilliant full moon. Though accustomed to composing nightly poems to Fulan under the bright moon, this time he abstained. Gazing at the East Mountain and the illuminated village, he remained silent, devoid of words or thoughts. Seated in despair and confusion, he grappled with the need to make a significant choice in his life, unsure of what that choice might be.

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"I fear this dream may just be a dream," he pondered, gazing toward the East Mountain. The impending decision weighed heavily on him—whether to cross the last valley and forsake the reality he had always dreamed of. "Choosing the dream means losing my reality, and the opposite holds true," he contemplated. The prospect of becoming the next village chief lay at his fingertips; the prize was within reach. On the other hand, the path to the East Mountain remained unclear regarding the potential prize—"but what if a greater prize awaits?" the boy speculated, unable to fathom anything greater than becoming the village head and marrying the world's most beautiful girl.

If he opted to stay, the news had to be shared with the villagers tomorrow. Alternatively, if he chose to continue his journey, he had to convey that decision as well. Explaining the dream and the haunting mystery to the villagers presented its own challenge— "Some may find it difficult to comprehend; others might mock it as nonsense."

Reflecting on his life journey, he recalled his childhood in the camp, his grandparents, his initial 70 friends, Lia-Na'in, the village chief, Rafael, and the most beautiful girl, Fulan. These were the pivotal figures in his life.

"Next," the boy mused, his eyes widening as if a revelation struck him. "You are the next," he remembered

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Lia-Na'in's words. "Yes, that's my goal for coming this far." With a slow declaration, he rose, stating, "I am the next!" Repeating it several times, he smiled, and that night, atop the highest hill in the village, he jubilantly shouted, "I AM THE NEXT!"

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EPILOGUE

Exhausted upon reaching the foothill, the boy rested on a rock, catching his breath. As he gazed at the sun, fatigue threatened to overcome him. The journey through the last valley, adorned with ancient trees, was challenging, but he had faced nightmares before; it wasn't a daunting prospect.

Nodding while looking down, he declared, "East Mountain, I am here!" Surveying the surroundings revealed emptiness. Leaves fell from the aging trees, stirred by the gentle wind. The sun, bidding its customary farewell, painted the sky. Surveying his surroundings, he sought reassurance that he had arrived at the right place. "The land where the most beautiful flowers grow and the river of hope flows," he recalled his grandfather's words. As he glanced around, he noticed a solitary Solidago on the verge of wilting beside the rock where he rested. Puzzled by its isolated presence, he pondered who had planted it. "Someone must have planted it, for if it grew naturally, it would thrive among its companions, not alone," he mused. Simultaneously, he sensed that it must

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be a sign. Encountering the flower, his heart found solace in the realization that he had finally reached his dream. "At last, the treasure is within my grasp," he exclaimed exuberantly from atop the rock. Overwhelmed with curiosity to behold the gold and pearls in his hands, he carefully uprooted the Solidago and began to dig into the soft earth with his crook. The pliable ground made his task effortless.

As the hours passed, darkness began to shroud the mountain. Despite having dug a sufficiently deep hole, he found nothing within it. Reflecting on his efforts, he muttered to himself, "The village chief was correct; there is nothing here." Disheartened, he abandoned the idea of digging any deeper. He covered the hole once more and replanted the Solidago. He knew it wouldn't survive for long. "This flower, too, will dry up soon, like my hope," he mused with a heavy heart. Concealing his inner turmoil with a forced smile, he made the decision to turn back. "So be it, at least I made it this far!" With his bag slung over his shoulder and his crook in hand, he began his journey back.

After covering some distance, the boy halted beneath a large tree, preparing to spend the night in the darkness. The next day, he planned to resume his journey homeward, avoiding the village to spare himself the shame of rejecting the chief's offer without gaining anything in return.

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That night, he kindled a modest fire and extracted a small book and a tiny graphite from his bag. Engaging in a ritual, he inscribed codes on the book's final page—a new lesson learned. Before closing the book, he smiled, softly vocalizing its meaning. "I am the next!" he laughed, contemplating, "The next treasure discoverer?" he tried to mock himself for a lesson learned without understanding. Closing the book, he nestled it under his head as a makeshift pillow. "His eyes were closed, and he no longer cared about what dream he would next experience. His head was filled with disappointments for not finding the treasure he had searched for a long time. However, his heart held a secret that he was about to discover: he was sleeping on his treasure. The treasure inside 'The Hidden' had already been found!

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About the Author

Meet **Nilton Nixon Norberto Luisa Moniz da Costa,** a dedicated English student at the prestigious Instituto São João de Brito (ISJB) in Timor-Leste. Prior to his current pursuit, he successfully completed his education at Colégio Santo Inácio de Loyola, renowned as one of the top schools in Timor-Leste, with a strong foundation in Jesuit education.

Passionate about the art of writing, Nilton has honed his skills through active participation in numerous national-level writing events. These experiences have not only refined his craft but have also served as the driving force behind his decision to pen his inaugural book during his formative years. Nilton's journey is a testament to his unwavering commitment to the written word, and his unique perspective promises to captivate and inspire readers on a profound level.

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